

Just Impolite by emmablowguns

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Summary:

Nancy wants them to be friends, Steve wants them to be friends, and Jonathan is just wondering what he did to end up with TWO whole people caring about him at the same time.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

the title comes from a song on my ot3 mix i made for these goobers
<http://8tracks.com/emmablownguns/i-m-your-comet-tonight>

this turned into way more than i thought i was gonna write but here i am

Nancy was more awkward than Jonathan thought.

Of course, he was plenty awkward himself, but it wasn't like that was a big secret to anyone. Nancy was different. She kept her own eccentricities on lockdown, only revealing it in strange shared moments. They'd been in a sort of friend-limbo ever since Will returned, and Jonathan didn't really know what to do about it.

On one hand, there was no reason to follow each other around the woods uncovering mysteries anymore, but on the other, it wasn't possible to simply blend back into the social groups they had been rigidly sticking to in the past.

This conflict was only made more obvious at school. Where he had originally regarded Nancy as just another student, she now stuck out like a sore thumb in the waves of classmates. He was suddenly seeing her everywhere, and she was seeing him back.

After months of being invisible to a large portion of the student body, even a little bit of attention felt foreign to him. Ever since Will had gone missing he'd felt a similar sense of scrutinization from his peers, but when it was Nancy it felt different. She'd smile his way as he past, clearly wondering if she should wave him over, and he'd raise his eyebrows at her in a sort of half hearted greeting and wonder the exact same thing.

With Steve, it was simple. Afterall, you can't really talk to someone you gave a black eye to, or at least that's what Jonathan had thought.

In the confusing months following Will's return, things had changed quickly for the trio. During this awkward friendship confusion with Nancy, Steve had revealed a surprisingly gentle side to him. He didn't say anything about it directly, and Jonathan still wasn't even 100% sure about what Steve thought of him, but little by little what had once been a fierce animosity was slowly growing towards... A friendship? Maybe? Whoever Steve used to be, that guy was long gone. He guessed that basically slaying a monster kinda changed a person. It was weird, to say the least, but lately everything had been weird. It had become almost customary to be surprised, or confused. But Jonathan would be lying if it didn't fill him with a private sense of relief whenever Steve listened to him instead of mocking him. It was progress.

Jonathan didn't even know when exactly he got so close to Nancy and Steve, as he wasn't used to being close with anyone besides his family before. Eventually he was just so relieved that the awkwardness had subsided that he didn't even think to question it.

Perhaps the strangest thing that had come out of all the drama with Will was that the town was suddenly interested in Jonathan's photography in ways that no one had ever been before. In a twisted way, it had been exposure for him. Suddenly, people were calling asking if he could take their graduation photos, their prom pictures, all offering compensation, and how could he say no to some extra money? It was almost like running a business, something that was totally new to him. Before, he'd let film sit for months before getting around to developing it, but the more people requested his services, the more he'd have to get them back in a timely manner. It became necessary to use all the free time he had to get these pictures out to people.

So, he'd show up about an hour or so before the start of school, heading straight to the dark room and working until the bell signaled the beginning of classes. Sometimes he'd even bring his Walkman and quietly listen to whatever tapes he could pick up on his way out the door. He wasn't picky. Jonathan was on his way to do the very same one morning when he heard a familiar voice calling his name.

"Jonathan?" He turned around to face the last person he expected to see at school early: Steve.

“Oh.” He said instead of a greeting, surprised to see him here at all.

“What are you doing here so early?” Steve took a couple steps closer, hands jammed in his pockets. The picture of apathetic cool.

“I’m developing, uh... photos in the...” He gestured in the direction of the classroom, answer enough to where he was going. “You know.”

“Oh, yeah I heard you’ve been doing like... graduation photos? Right? Is that true?”

“Yup, just taking pictures for people.” Jonathan looked down at the short distance between their feet; though it was only a few inches, it felt more like miles.

Steve nodded in understanding, but after a long silence it was clear their conversation was floundering. Jonathan wanted desperately to get out of this awkward situation, edging away from Steve to try and make his escape.

“Well, I should-”

“I’m just here because-”

They shared a brief look of confusion, both waiting for the other to speak first.

“You go.” Steve said apologetically.

“No, you. What were you saying?”

“Oh, I was just saying that...” He paused, tapping his lips to remember what he’d been trying to say. The action compelled Jonathan to stare as an uncomfortable feeling squirmed through the pit of his stomach.

He shook his head and looked at the lockers, focusing on their peeling paint instead of Steve Harrington’s lips.

“Oh! Nancy’s doing some SAT prep course and she needed a ride. Sorry, don’t know how I forgot.” Steve smiled, tousling his hair and fiddling with a loose thread on the sleeve of his shirt.

“Right.” Jonathan nodded, unsure of how to reply. Though Steve’s tone had been casual, his hands were in a frenzy as they found something to toy with. Fiddling with the fabric of his sleeves, tousling his already perfect hair, and even biting his fingernails. Why did he seem so... Nervous? It was almost as if he too didn’t want to be in this situation, but that only confused Jonathan more. If this were just put on to impress Nancy, why would he look so uncomfortable?

“Yeah I keep telling her that... That she’ll be fine but it’s...” He shrugged, laughing nervously and looking about as pained as Jonathan felt.

This sucked. Why was this so weird? They’d killed monsters together and they couldn’t talk like normal people? Like friends, if they were even that?

“I really gotta go,” Jonathan turned to leave, not even waiting for Steve to reply. It seemed to work, because he wasn’t followed to the dark room. He continued to develop photos quietly, the events in the hallway never quite leaving his mind.

Something in that exchange must’ve meant more than Jonathan had thought, because immediately after Nancy started joining him in the dark room for lunch. Just a couple times a week, and she always came alone, much to his relief.

She had always invited him to lunch during their rare conversations, but he’d never really taken up the offer. Jonathan knew she meant well, but even being friends with her didn’t protect him from the anxiety associated with being in the same room with his entire class. It was too much, he couldn’t do it. Additionally, Steve would be there, and that was strange enough on its own.

Jonathan was initially unsure of how he felt about Nancy visiting him during lunch, but it was these little visits that kindled an actual *friendship* between them.

He always got the feeling that she didn’t have too many friends, as he’d never really seen her around the school with anyone else but Barb or Steve. And after what happened with Barb, this feeling was

only exacerbated. If she was with anyone else it was usually just for study groups, which Nancy would complain about constantly.

“AP kids are vicious,” She’d told him during one of their visits, “I don’t trust any of them further than I can throw them.” She took a defiant bite of her sandwich, as if it were an act of rebellion.

“How are they vicious?” Jonathan had laughed, but he wondered if Nancy didn’t trust “AP kids” for a reason other than she was saying.

“They’re not like... *really* vicious. They’re just mean. Pretentious.”

Pretentious. She’d used that word to describe him once, but that was before they were... whatever this was.

“So why do you go?”

“Huh?” She said, as if the option didn't even exist.

“So why go to their study groups if you hate them so much?”

“I guess I've never thought about not going before.”

“Why?”

Nancy stood up, wiping bread crumbs from her pants and peering over Jonathan’s shoulder as he worked. He visibly tensed, as if she were a teacher monitoring a final exam, but it was just Nancy.

“If I studied with anyone else, it would be more like tutoring. I'm on the same level as those jerks.”

“Are you calling me an idiot?” He chuckled and turned away from his workbench, looking down at her in the near darkness.

“No way!” She laughed, giving him a playful shove “I would probably study with you.”

“Oh I see, so you're calling Steve an idiot?”

He couldn't see her very well, but to him, she appeared to be deep in thought.

“He's not an AP kid, that's for sure, but that's probably why I like him so much.”

As they got closer their friendship started to float somewhere in between romantic and platonic, or at least, that's what it felt like to Jonathan. He had it bad for her, had had it bad for her ever since she'd followed him into the woods.

It hadn't meant nothing.

They were friends, obviously, and he knew it could be all in his head but there was something there between them. It was like an invisible chord neither of them could cut. Her gaze would linger on him longer than necessary, making him feel exposed. She'd always tell him to be safe whenever she said goodbye, no matter where he was going. Her hugs felt a bit warmer than usual, as if they were inches away from crawling into each other's skin.

Most damningly, Nancy always looked like she had something on the tip of her tongue that she couldn't say. She'd ask him vague questions, as if tip toeing around something bigger. It drove Jonathan crazy. He wanted to hear whatever she constantly seemed to be holding back, but sometimes he wasn't sure it was his place to ask.

One day in particular, she nearly stormed into the dark room, causing him to jump slightly at the sudden noise. It was almost impossible to ignore the whirlwind that was a troubled Nancy Wheeler.

“Are you okay?” He asked, cautiously, so as not to rouse whatever mood had caused her to burst into the room like that.

“What do you think of Steve?” The question sent a strange thrill up his spine, catching him completely off guard.

Jonathan had been asked the question before, this time however was altogether different. Despite Nancy's loud entrance, her tone was neutral, free of any bias towards one response or the other. It wasn't worded hopefully, like she wanted Jonathan's approval, but it also wasn't scornful, like she was looking for ammo.

“I don't know. Haven't you asked me this before?”

"I know, I really have." She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Did something happen with Steve?" He asked when it became apparent she had nothing else to add.

"No, not really. He just..." She was holding back again, Jonathan could almost hear the gears grinding in her head to form an excuse to change the subject.

"What'd he say?"

"He thinks you're avoiding him, that you still hate him or something."

"Why would..." He paused, thinking of a way of putting it delicately and immediately giving it up. "Sorry but, why would Steve care if I hated him?"

"So, do you?"

"You didn't answer my question, Nancy." She looked away, biting her lip for a few moments before replying cryptically.

"All I can say is that he really wants you to like him."

"Why?"

Nancy shrugged, refusing to meet his gaze. He tried to pry more out of her, but quickly realized she wasn't budging. Eventually, she sighed, crossing her arms stubbornly.

"Look, if you want to know more, talk to him yourself. I won't be your messenger, okay?"

"Okay, fine." Jonathan said, raising his hands in defeat.

They spent the rest of their lunch period in a tense silence.

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The prospect of confronting Steve was daunting. He wasn't sure what he would even say, where he would begin. He also wondered if he

would even need to be the one to strike up a conversation. They weren't friends exactly, but sometimes Jonathan got the feeling Steve really wanted them to be. Lately, it seemed as though he'd been trying to find excuses to talk to him.

He was developing photos one morning when he heard the door open and whipped around to see Steve entering cautiously, like he wasn't sure if he belonged here. He pressed pause on his tape and pulled his headphones down to his neck.

"What are *you* doing here?" Jonathan didn't mean for it to come out so bitter, cringing internally as Steve shot him a wounded look that lasted only a moment before it was covered up by his calm facade.

"I just wanted to see what you were doing, if it was more interesting than Nancy's study group."

"Oh." Jonathan turned back to what he was doing, "It's not that much more interesting."

"What were you listening to there?" Steve said, stepping away from the doorway and brushing against Jonathan's shoulder.

"It's really nothing special."

"What, is it a guilty pleasure or something? Don't wanna tell me?"

Jonathan said nothing, and he could practically feel the anxiety radiating off of Steve. After awhile, he sighed and leaned against the nearest wall. Jonathan smiled smugly down at his photos waiting to bloom into the crisp pictures of smiling graduates.

He still wasn't sure if he really wanted Steve to like him yet or if he was just enjoying the back and forth. He had to admit, it was fun to watch the usually calm and collected Steve Harrington stutter nervously. He took a twisted sense of pride in it.

At the beginning of the year, nothing Jonathan did would've had an impact on Steve. He wasn't even on his radar, but now that he and Nancy were together, Jonathan was kind of a package deal, so Steve had to put up with it.

"You know I think it's funny that you're so scared of me." Jonathan said matter-of-factly, not even turning away from his work. The dark room emboldened him. This was his territory, after all.

"What?" Steve sounded absolutely scandalized, it was pretty satisfying.

"Well, why else would you be so nervous to talk to me?" Jonathan said as he briskly hung his prints out to dry before turning to face him. His face was obscured by the light, but his body language said enough.

"Nervous! " He scoffed, but his shoulders were hunched, arms wrapped around himself as if on the defense.

"Nancy told me you think I hate you."

"I know, I told her to find out if you did."

This was a surprise to Jonathan, who'd assumed that Nancy had talked to him unprompted. It only added a layer of mystery and confusion to Steve. He knew he had to keep pressing on.

"What did she say?"

"She just told me to talk to you so..."

He looked at him for a long time, searching for the joke in his eyes, waiting for the punchline. Once it became apparent there was none, Jonathan headed for the door. Steve followed, a protest rising in his throat before he was interrupted.

"She also told me you really want me to like you." Jonathan punctuated that by turning on his heel and opening the door slowly to protect his eyes.

"Wait, she told you *that part*?" Steve said as he followed him out the door and down the hall.

"Is it true?" Jonathan asked, still not acknowledging him as he walked to his locker. A few more students had entered the school, eyeing the pair suspiciously as they walked and talked.

"Well... Yeah, I guess so. I don't want to be like, enemies anymore. Especially with Nancy and-"

"So you're just doing this for her, then? To get you brownie points with Nancy so you can *fuck* her more?" The expletive made Steve flinch. Jonathan spotted his locker on the end of a long row, going through the familiar motions of unlocking it.

"Jesus no, of course it's not like that, Jonathan." Steve sighed, picking at his nails nervously.

Jonathan rolled his eyes at his locker as he pulled out his backpack, slinging it over his shoulders and facing Steve.

"Then why?"

"I just want to be friends, okay? Is that bad?"

"You want to be *my* friend?" He said doubtfully, staring at Steve's frenzied hands, enamored with his nervous habits yet again.

"I do! Seriously, what is this? I just think you seem..." Steve paused, appearing to be lost in thought. He took a deep breath before continuing.

"Nancy seems to... To really like you and so I... I really wanted to..." Steve trailed off, suddenly seeming very small, and Jonathan halted the doubt he'd been feeling. Maybe Steve really did want to be friends? After all, he wasn't sure anyone else would've stuck around as long as they did, especially considering they'd had a physical fight. Steve's progress was actually shocking when you compared it to that. Jonathan took a deep breath and shook his head.

"I don't have that many friends. I'm jaded as hell. There's a reason why I don't automatically befriend the first person to talk to me."

Steve nodded, looking at him hopefully.

"But I... I'm willing to... Give being friends a try. Okay?"

"Really?" He breathed, as if the admission had taken his breath away.
"For real?"

“Yeah. For real.”

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry this took so long, i was moving into my new dorm at college!! i felt all scholarly typing this up in my dorm room at a real desk, which is pretty nerdy.

Apparently, trying to be friends wasn't as hard as Jonathan thought it would be.

Steve had been a real asshole in the past, and Nancy had been pretty stubborn herself, but as soon as they all knew how to act around each other, things had settled relatively quickly. They fell into an easy routine, with Steve joining Jonathan in the dark room in the mornings and for lunch with Nancy. Distance between them dissolved until it was like there had never been any tension. They were closer than ever.

Jonathan was still marveling at the fact that two whole people besides his family actually cared about what he had to say. It was foreign to him, but not unwelcome by any stretch.

Steve and Jonathan still didn't talk too much in the mornings, but it was less of a tense silence now and more of a companionable one. Most surprising of all was that he didn't mind if Jonathan wanted to just tune out and listen to his music, working hard to develop the next set of prints for his eager customers.

One morning, he felt a light tap on his shoulder and turned to see Steve mouthing something. He paused, pushing one headphone to the side.

"Do you mind if I listen?"

"I... How?"

"Well that thing has two headphone jacks right?" Steve produced a pair of headphones from his bag, one that Jonathan wasn't even aware he'd had.

“Oh, yeah it does. Are you sure, though? This might not be your type of music.”

“I don’t mind.” A grin slowly formed on his face, the red light making his features seem almost ghoulish, “Plus, I’m curious to find out what *The Jonathan Byers* listens to while developing everyone’s graduation photos.”

His smile was sickeningly infectious, and it always made Jonathan shiver in a way he preferred not to think about.

“O-Okay.” He stammered, pulling out his Walkman and presenting the second headphone jack to Steve. He put on his headphones and plugged them in, nodding at Jonathan when he was ready.

Both of their headphones weren’t that long, so they were tethered quite close together with Steve standing by Jonathan at his workbench. It was kind of awkward positioning, but neither seemed to mind as Jonathan got lost in his work and Steve listened attentively. Occasionally, they’d brush against each other, and Jonathan would be jolted by the warmth and contact. He guessed it was just a new experience to him, as he had never had anyone “shadow” the developing process before.

Even though they were technically friends now, something about Steve still made him nervous. This feeling of nervousness used to be fear of ridicule and scorn, but now... Well, Jonathan didn’t really know what he was feeling now. He’d catch himself seeing something that reminded him of Steve, or blushing at the way he’d listen attentively to him explain how he developed photos, not used to the focus being entirely on him.

He tried to rationalize that he’d felt similar feelings for Nancy, and that it could be a friendship thing, but that only opened up another can of worms.

Sometimes, it alarmed Jonathan how often they were both on his mind.

Eventually, he stepped back, smiling at his prints which were hung up to dry. He paused the tape, and tried to unsee the disappointed

look on Steve's face.

"That's all I can really do for now, so we should probably-"

"Wait, I want to hear the end of your mix! We didn't even get to the B side."

We. That word was too much for him, all things considered. Jonathan knew this situation should've felt normal, just two friends listening to music together, but something about it felt more intimate than that. Something in him fluttered at Steve wanting to hear more, but what part of him that came from he wasn't sure.

"We probably wouldn't even finish the B side before the bell, I've got to go to my locker."

"Come on! Let's just listen to what we can before the bell rings."

"Isn't that a little..." Jonathan chuckled nervously, surprised at Steve's interest in something as trivial as a mix tape. His hands were trembling almost imperceptibly, his heart hammering in his chest. He hoped to god Steve didn't notice, he would probably die of embarrassment. Jonathan couldn't wrench himself away from staring at the way Steve's hair was pushed back from the headphones. Somehow, he was mesmerized by it.

"What?" Steve said, and oh my god, it was like he really didn't know. Like he really didn't see what Jonathan saw, that this was becoming more than what either of them had really bargained for when they agreed to try being friends.

"Wouldn't people think it was like... kinda weird?"

"I don't really see why they would-"

The door creaked open, fluorescent lights temporarily blinding both of them as Nancy entered the dark room. They both groaned, shielding their eyes against the sudden light. Jonathan yanked off his headphones, feeling very much like a child caught doing something they knew they shouldn't be doing. Steve, however, looked only mildly surprised by Nancy's sudden appearance.

“What are you guys doing in here?” She smiled at the two of them, walking over to Steve and standing on her toes to give him a quick peck on the lips. Jonathan blushed, but his eyes were unwaveringly focused on the two of them.

“Jonathan was just showing me his mixtape.” Steve addressed this to Nancy before smiling over at him. She turned to him, eyebrows raised quizzically.

“It was *his* idea.” He said it apologetically, as if to absolve himself of the blame, but she seemed unaffected.

“That’s cool.” She shrugged, looking between both of them.

“We were just about to leave.” Jonathan added, not quite sure where the anxiety was coming from.

Nancy didn’t seem to mind, and Steve didn’t seem to mind, so why was his heart beating so fast? They seemed to sense it, because they suddenly became very cautious, looking at him curiously like he was a dangerous animal. He tended to feel like he was under a microscope with them. The room was silent for an almost uncomfortable amount of time until Steve broke in, casually cutting the tension in the air.

“Yeah, we should probably head back.”

“Definitely.” Jonathan replied, quickly leaving the room with the pair following closely behind.

That scene in the morning never left his mind for more than a second. Jonathan would think he’d gotten over it, but then he’d pass Steve in the hallway and it would just start all over again.

He didn’t know why he felt guilty, out of everything he knew he should be feeling, why was it guilt? While feelings were on the table, Jonathan would very much like to go back to before he’d gotten so close with Steve, as it was potentially becoming a problem.

He’d already accepted his hopeless crush on Nancy, but this close friendship with Steve was starting to feel... Different. They were both on his mind all the time, he couldn’t go a day without reflecting on

something they'd said or did that made him feel appreciated. (Because they really were becoming some of his best friends)

Maybe it was just becoming very apparent that he wasn't exactly as accustomed to social situations as he had previously liked to believe, but he got the feeling that Nancy and Steve really liked him too. But it was just friend love, right? You could be in friend love with anyone, even a guy. That wasn't strange at all. Made sense, actually.

These thoughts were on his mind and growing only in intensity by the minute. Jonathan wasn't sure how exactly lunch would go, but as he walked to the darkroom, he hoped it would go well.

"What are you doing this Saturday?" Nancy asked, bursting into the darkroom sometime later with Steve in tow and their lunches in hand. Jonathan looked up from his work, surprised at her sudden enthusiasm. He noticed they were holding hands.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Steve and I are going to the art museum downtown and were wondering if you wanted to come along." She looked at Steve, who nodded in agreement.

"I... I would love to go but wouldn't that be... Like..." Jonathan stammered nervously, trying to find a polite way to ask if he would be too much of a third wheel. He wasn't very good at this kinda stuff, but if he knew one thing it was that crashing a date could get pretty awkward.

"No, it's totally cool." She reassured him, stepping closer to lightly take his hand, "We both want you to come, it'll be more fun."

He almost froze at Nancy taking his hand. It was barely contact, but it still caused his breathing to hitch. He glanced at Steve, but he didn't seem to notice or else he didn't mind.

"I don't really have money to spend right now, though." As if he ever did, Jonathan cringed internally. It felt like a weak excuse, but it was true.

"That's why we're going to the Menil Collection, bro. It's free!" Steve said, his excitement perhaps the most surprising part of this conversation. He'd never seem like someone who could get excited about art.

"Oh, well then I guess I can go."

"Cool, I'll get you around eleven Saturday, is that okay?"

"Yeah, definitely."

"Bring your camera too!" Nancy added, "There's a couple other places downtown we wanted to check out. It'll be a fun day trip."

They both smiled, and Jonathan smiled back, his heart fluttering at the prospect of weekend plans. He'd never really hung out with both of them outside of school before, and usually that would make him nervous, but Jonathan was determined to be excited about this outing. It would be good, he'd needed to have some fun, right? That's what his mother was always saying, and maybe she was right.

For the rest of lunch, his mind kept wandering back to Nancy's comment. They had both wanted to invite him, not just her.

It was progress. That's all. It didn't mean anything else. They were friends. He reminded himself of this almost like a mantra, trying to stave off feeling he knew were too intense to hold off.

"Have you ever been to the Menil before?" Steve asked him, breaking Jonathan's inner monologue. He was leaning against the wall, his arm slung over Nancy's shoulder as they both looked at him expectantly.

"No, I didn't even know it existed."

"Nancy and I just found it one day when we got lost downtown." He chuckled, before detangling himself and walking over to Jonathan, examining his workspace.

"Oh god!" She groaned, shaking her head at the memory. "That was a total disaster."

“Why were you down there anyway?” Jonathan hadn't been to the city since Will was missing, and he hadn't liked that visit all that much.

“I was trying to take her out on like a real fancy date, it was right after all that... crazy stuff happened.” They all seemed to shuddered in unison, wracked by the memories. “I basically wanted to say I was sorry for being an asshole.”

“Oh, Steve.” Nancy said, walking up to him and hugging him tightly from behind. Jonathan looked over at Steve, watching him snuff out the sadness before it even took hold, replacing it with a small coy grin. Jonathan felt a strange sense of guilt, thinking back to how hard it had been on everyone, how hard it *still* was on everyone.

Steve turned around, prying Nancy from his back and taking her hands in his.

“Do you think Jonathan ever gets bored of developing the same type of photo over and over?”

“Excuse me?” Jonathan said, turning around to face them. Their hands had moved to each other's hips, and something that felt a lot like jealousy twinged through Jonathan, but he shoved it down.

“Hmm... Maybe. I think he wants to spread his wings and *fly!*” Nancy said dramatically, spreading her arms like wings and giggling to herself. Steve laughed, suddenly and heartily. He let go of Nancy and turned to clap Jonathan on the shoulder.

“You're losing your edge, buddy. You need to take pictures of *cool* stuff.”

“My edge?” Jonathan said incredulously, suppressing the wide grin that threatened to nearly split his face in two. Nancy was laughing softly, attempting to cover it up with her hands.

“Yeah, when's the last time you took a photo of something weird just for fun?”

He thought for a moment, then reached for his bag, digging through it to find the camera. Steve watched curiously as he fiddled with it

for a bit, before tilting the lens up and snapping a picture of his face. The flash lit up the room, Nancy shielded her eyes and Steve squeezed his shut to protect them.

“Hey! What was that for?”

“You said take a picture of something weird.”

Nancy started laughing even harder, not bothering to cover it up this time, and Jonathan smiled wider than he thought possible. Steve gaped openly, his eyes narrowing at Jonathan before he too laughed goodnaturally.

“Damn, okay. You got me there, Byers.”

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The click of the seatbelt felt incredibly loud in Steve’s car, but Jonathan wasn’t thinking about that now. All he was thinking about was this mysterious museum that Steve and Nancy swore by, and why they had invited him to come along.

“You ready?” Steve said when Jonathan had situated himself in the back seat of his car Saturday morning.

“Yeah, let’s go.” But Jonathan wondered if he really was.

They pulled out of his gravel driveway, the battered house growing smaller and smaller in Steve’s rear view mirror as they made their way down the road. The sky was ashen and threatened rain, but Steve was wearing sunglasses nonetheless. They rode in silence for awhile, Jonathan watching and occasionally snapping pictures as rolling fields turned into city streets.

“You’re really gonna like the Menil, Jonathan.” Nancy said, breaking the silence. He could hear the smile in her voice.

“Oh?”

“Yeah!” She turned around to face him, “Plus, maybe it can inspire you to get your edge back.”

He lifted his camera and snapped a quick picture of her, the red of the spotlight lighting up the tips of her hair. She looked momentarily confused at the impromptu photo, but smiled brightly and turned to face the road again.

“Stop teasing him about his edge, Nancy.” Steve said, his eyes focused on the road. “He’s in the process of getting it back, you can’t mess with someone at such a critical time.”

“Right, my bad. This is a very serious time.”

Jonathan looked between them, waiting for the next light to turn red. When it did he did something risky: unbuckling his seatbelt he poked out between their seats and started wildly snapping close ups of Steve and Nancy, alternating between the two as they whooped and hollered, delighted with his play.

“ *Very* serious.” Jonathan quipped, smiling brightly as he returned to his seat.

“How is that camera treating you by the way, Byers?” Steve said once things had settled back down again. His tone was edging on cautious, essentially confirming for Jonathan that the gift hadn’t just come from Nancy, as he’d always suspected.

“It’s great.”

Jonathan tried not to think of his dad at the sight of each skyscraper, knowing he was somewhere in the city. It was a big city, he reassured himself, it would be a long shot to run into him here.

The building was a lot bigger than he’d thought, plain and white with a metal grey awning stretching over the pavement where people took cover from the light drizzle that had begun to fall. Jonathan wasn’t really sure what free museums even looked like. All the ones he’d seen had been huge, with expansive sculpture gardens and fountains which basically signaled you were about to spend your entire paycheck to look at some old bones. This however, appeared to be very different from that. They parked in the lot across the street, their shoes scratching against the cracked asphalt as they walked, side by side with Nancy in the middle. Her excitement seemed to vibrate the

air between them, he could feel her smiling without even looking. Once they were good to cross, she grabbed their hands and lightly jogged forward with Steve and Jonathan scrambling to keep up. The boys briefly shared a look of exasperated admiration. This was Nancy, after all; her enthusiasm for all things museums was to be expected. Jonathan smiled, looking down at his feet as they seemed to land on the sidewalk.

The building was just as plain on the inside as it was on the outside, with white wood floors and immaculate white walls, Jonathan felt as though every step he took could disturb the perfection of the museum. The Menil wasn't that crowded, though there were the occasional crowds huddled around a particular piece of art. Nonetheless, the building was very quiet. A hush seemed to befall the entire museum, so that all that could be heard was the soft patter of rain outside. The group slowly wandered, their eyes open and their mouths shut. They had never been together and been this quiet for so long, but it felt appropriate in this kind of situation. After all, it was more like a temple than just a museum, from bizarre contemporary art with an indecipherable meaning to ancient warrior masks, which were as utilitarian as they were decorative, each exhibit was completely different.

It was just really a shame that photography wasn't allowed in the building, not because Jonathan wanted to document the art, but more the habits of his friends.

They each connected to different pieces in entirely different ways. For example, Steve had been more interested in what was under his fingernails than Rothko's pieces, but Nancy was in awe of them, her eyes going wide and her mouth slightly agape. However whenever he walked past a display of ancient statues, Steve would let out a small gasp, almost imperceptible, before looking left and right quickly to make sure no one had heard.

Jonathan couldn't help but watch them both, fascinated more by their reactions than the art.

"You were right." He said softly, leaning in a bit closer to Nancy like they were conspirators in a secret mission.

“What?” She whispered back, “Do you like it?”

He smiled and nodded.

“What are you guys talking about?” Steve interrupted in a poor imitation of a whisper. He was never too good at being quiet, today had been a miracle. He looked between Nancy and Jonathan, who were both smiling. “Did we do good?” He asked, giving Jonathan a thumbs up, almost in question.

“Definitely good.” He whispered, returning the gesture.

When they left the museum, Steve was the first to break the silence again, his voice the first loud sound they’d heard in hours.

“Did you get your edge back, Jonathan?”

“I think so.” He smiled, looking down at their feet. From left to right it was, Nancy’s black ballet flats, Jonathan’s beat up sneakers, and Steve’s converse. Their shoes seemed to shine against the dark pavement, wet from the rain.

“I think the Menil is enough to get anyone’s edge back.” Nancy smiled, grabbing Jonathan’s hand as they crossed the street.

Just as he was about to look over at him to see if he noticed this, Steve took his hand as well.

“*Anyone’s* edge? Are you sure about that?” Steve said, quirking his brows playfully and releasing him once they had successfully crossed. Jonathan wondered if he had simply imagined the light squeeze of his hand he’d felt before Steve had let go.

“Well, either way, it was pretty cool, right Jonathan?”

Jonathan nodded slowly, unsure if that hand holding had meant anything more than what they were making it out to be.

The hard thing about suddenly having two new friends at once, was that he wasn’t sure what was normal in friendships anymore. I mean, obviously he was going to hold his little brother’s hand whenever they crossed the street, but that was a protective thing. When a kid

goes missing, you kind of want to make sure that doesn't happen *again*, Upside Down circumstances or not. Jonathan hadn't really had friends since elementary school, before all of them hit puberty and found their place in the social food chain. Even back then, he wasn't quite sure what he was doing.

"We should get something to eat." Steve suggested once they reached his car.

"What about that pizza place we went to last time?"

They both turned to Jonathan expectantly, waiting for him to reply.

"I... I don't..." He looked away, embarrassment turning his face red, "I have food at home."

"I'll pay for it, if that's the issue." Steve offered instantly, which made Jonathan feel even more embarrassed. It wasn't like he didn't have a dime to his name, but he could always save more, and it was no secret that his family wasn't the wealthiest in town.

"No, I couldn't. It's okay. Let's just go, I'll eat later."

"Are you sure, Jonathan?" Nancy asked, her eyes worried and her voice sickeningly gentle.

"Yeah, of course. It's fine."

They got to the pizza place without further complaint from either of them, much to Jonathan's relief. He really didn't like the focus being placed on him, especially when it became obvious that he couldn't accept handouts as readily as everyone else. He knew they meant well, but it was embarrassing. Jonathan had grown up his entire life watching his mom fend for herself, so it was pretty hard for him to internalize that he could accept help and that he wasn't alone.

The place was counter service by the slice, and Jonathan could tell it was well loved. All over the walls were yellowed posters for various movies and celebrities, their corners curling up and hugging the thumbtack that kept it in place.

"I'll go order, you guys find a place to sit." Steve said, nodding at

Nancy and Jonathan.

“Okay, you know what I want.” Nancy said, squeezing his hand and leading Jonathan to what was apparently their “usual booth” in the corner of the restaurant. That easy familiarity between them made his heart ache, and he instantly felt like a third wheel.

“What exhibit did you like the most, Jonathan?”

The question startled him out of his self pity, and he gave a weak shrug.

“They were all pretty cool, I loved all of them.”

“I liked Rothko, he’s my favorite.” Her smile was so endearing, Jonathan felt couldn’t stare for too long or else he’d go blind.

“I could tell.”

“How could you tell? Was it that obvious?” She seemed shocked, unaware of how obvious her affection for the artist had been

“Well, truthfully-”

Suddenly Steve appeared out of nowhere expertly brandishing 3 plates of pizza, plus a couple of cans of soda.

“Ta-dah!” He cheered, placing everyone’s plates in front of them like a waiter before sliding into a booth next to Nancy.

“Oh, you didn’t have to-” Jonathan began, before he was cut off.

“Dude, the slices are like a dollar. It’s fine.”

“I can pay you back.” He replied weakly, feeling guilty.

“No need, consider it a gift.”

Jonathan shook his head before tucking into the meal with everyone else. He guessed the pizza was good enough to make up for the embarrassment at Steve Harrington having bought it for him.

They spent longer than necessary in that booth just talking, first

about the Menil, then the city itself, then just anything that crossed their minds. They leapfrogged from topic to topic as quickly as they were brought up, just looking for an excuse to talk longer.

“You know, I wasn’t even really focused on the art that much.” Jonathan said, surprising both of them.

“Did you not like the Menil?” Nancy asked, her head cocked to the side and eyebrows furrowed.

“No I loved it! I just really liked watching you guys react to the art.”

“How come?” Steve asked, his voice slightly hesitant.

“Well, it was just....” He paused, thinking for a moment on how to word it, “It was *cute* to see what exhibits you guys connected with the most.”

They both seemed to smile at that, which was all that mattered. Jonathan felt that time didn’t matter, so long as they were in this booth at this specific pizza place. He didn’t want to leave this moment they had created together.

However, as the sun set it became clear that it was probably time to head home, as none of them wanted to get stuck navigating out of the city after dark. They walked back to their car, holding hands again, this time with Steve in the middle. Jonathan wasn’t sure how that had happened, but he wasn’t complaining and neither were any of them.

Once in the car, Jonathan leaned his head against the window, the cool glass pressing into the side of his head insistently.

“Today was a good day.” Nancy remarked, almost sleepily as she too leaned on the window.

“You guys are already tired?” Steve laughed, pulling out of the parking lot and starting the journey home.

“Well yeah, it was a long day.” Jonathan quipped from the back seat, watching the buildings roll by.

They drove in silence, with the radio playing softly in the background. Each of them reflecting on this fun outing, which seemed to fall into their lap unexpectedly. Months ago, they were all fighting monsters, each other, and themselves, but now they were happy. It was almost unbelievable. Jonathan still felt like sometimes he'd wake up and Will would be gone again, or that the monsters wouldn't hesitate to finish what they'd started with Nancy. He couldn't let those thoughts get to him though, as today had been great. More than great, actually. Today was probably the best time he'd had in awhile, even before Will had gone missing. It was true he'd been long overdue for a good time, and today had definitely helped "restore his edge."

Even though the car ride was spent in relative silence, Jonathan was sad to see his own house illuminated by Steve's headlights. He didn't want to go back to his room, which had felt more empty with everyday he became closer to his new friends.

"Well, I guess this is my stop." Jonathan said, popping open the door and stepping out. Nancy rolled down her window, peering her head out.

"Today was awesome, thanks for coming." She said, smiling her sunny smile.

"Yeah thanks for inviting me," He said, leaning down to peer into the window, "And thanks for the pizza, Steve."

"No problem, man." Steve nodded at him, almost approvingly.

Jonathan smiled at both of them before hiking back up his driveway and into his house, where his mother was sitting on the couch doing nothing in particular.

"Oh, you're back." She said, perking up a bit, "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, it was pretty cool." He shrugged, heading to his room without another word.

Notes for the Chapter:

so the Menil isn't in Indianapolis, it's in Houston

(where I live) and it's free and really does have Rothko and some ancient warrior tribal art and everything I described. I'm sure there's something similar to that in Indiana, but I've actually BEEN to the Menil, so I figured to just go with what I know.

Also, I'm not sure about where you guys live, but when you live in nearby small cities, you just say "I live in Houston" and refer to it as "downtown" so that's what I did here - just in case anyone was maybe confused by that.

Also Hawkins ain't a real place so let's say it's real close to Indianapolis - we've obviously seen some evidence of this. so.

anyway!!!!

I'm gonna update more soon. thanks for everyone reading

oh also - I didn't know this but I had researched it, Walkman back then did really have two audio jacks so 2 ppl could listen!! that's pretty cool! I googled it

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

its really weird for me to be churnin shit out this fast. but i really wanted to finish this chapter before classes start tomorrow bc who knows how that will be. i have at least one more chapter planned, but this story ended up becoming a lot longer than i thought it would be so who knows

side note: today in the dining hall i had this weird as fuck panini that had gross mustard on it but there were some peanut butter bars so cant complain. feel like maybe that vibe of the gross mustard but good peanut butter shines thru this chapter. im totally bullshitting you.

The more active Jonathan was, the more his portfolio had grown from photos of trees to a haphazard documentary of his outing with Steve and Nancy. There was one photo in particular of them he couldn't stop staring at. He wasn't sure why, as it wasn't that well composed by even amateur standards, but he was still mesmerized. It was a candid photo, Steve and Nancy laughing in the car with burgers and fries they'd picked up earlier. The flash had been on, washing most of the picture out save for their eyes and mouths. But sometimes when Jonathan looked closely he could see a faint yellowing outline of where Steve's black eye had been. It sent a shiver down his spine, to think about how he'd inflicted that. He hadn't really become friends with Steve until the bruise had started fading, but this photo was the sole reminder of how far they'd come.

It wasn't in his portfolio, he wouldn't show this any colleges or serious artists, and he doubted Steve and Nancy even knew he had it. It was just a secret he liked to keep to himself. A reminder.

Jonathan was finding more and more that when he wasn't with Steve and Nancy, he was thinking about when he was going to see them next, and the pictures he would take when he did. Their weekend trip to the Menil turned out to open the door to more visits. While it had originally started as just mornings and lunch, it soon snowballed into

much more than that. They were hanging out together almost every weekend without fail. At this point it wasn't a question if they wanted to hang out, but rather a question of what they would do when they did.

It started with Nancy asking them to study at her house, which really meant watch Nancy study while the boys looked on in awe. Steve and Jonathan would start out trying to pay attention, their own work in their laps, but as the hours progressed the two slowly migrated to sprawl across Nancy's bed, with Nancy at her desk copying paragraph after paragraph.

"I can see now why you only study with AP kids," Jonathan remarked, laying at the end of the bed while Steve leaned against the headboard.

"What?" Nancy said, jarred from her studying.

"Nothing, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"He was saying he can see why you only study with AP kids." Steve interjected, jabbing Jonathan's shoulder with his foot.

"Well, we're not being very helpful, are we?" He said, propping himself up on his elbow and looking over at Steve.

It wasn't that either of them weren't smart, but compared to their amateur studying techniques, Nancy looked like she had a PhD in color coded notes and flashcards.

"I figured it would end up like that. I really don't mind." She flipped through the pages of another composition notebook, looking for space to fill in even more notes.

"You don't think we should leave so you can focus?"

This made Nancy pause, turning to face Steve and Jonathan with a small smile.

"You guys help me focus."

The admission made both of them grin somewhat bashfully, but it

was Jonathan who broke away from Nancy's gaze first. It made him nervous whenever she smiled at him like that, something about it felt... Misdirected. Afterall, he was just a friend, right? Why would she be as kind to him if she didn't.... Jonathan shook his head, determined not to overthink things. Nancy was nice. They were friends. He didn't have to look too deep into things to enjoy them.

She'd whip through chapter upon chapter of textbooks with keywords in the titles like "advanced" "college level" or "test prep." She was effectively paving her way out of Hawkins, her success measured in how many textbooks she had to lug to school. Her enthusiasm for academics was *why* it wasn't mind-numbingly boring to watch her study. Even when they asked her to slow down, or to catch them up, they both still liked being there with her.

Watching Nancy crush it at something she was passionate about was well worth being lost on a couple things, Jonathan thought.

"Most of the time I don't even know what you're studying for, but I know you'll do great at whatever it is." Steve chuckled, plucking up a magazine off of Nancy's bedside table and flipping through it.

"Mmm," Nancy murmured, already getting back to work.

When they weren't at Nancy's house, they were at Steve's. His house was usually empty, which just made it easier for the group to be more rowdy. At Nancy's house, they were confined to her room, tucked away and quiet under parental supervision. At Steve's however, they'd pretty much have free reign.

Jonathan enjoyed these visits, but as they grew in frequency he began to notice something about Steve. Even though they always seemed to find something entertaining to do, there was a sadness in his eyes. He seemed to flinch whenever their voices echoed in the spacious house. He'd always say that his parents could be home at anytime, but Jonathan and Nancy usually left late in the evening, with no other cars in sight. It made Jonathan wonder how often Steve really spent by himself, and he felt sorry for his friend. It wasn't like he could do anything, and it certainly wasn't really his business, but Jonathan felt it would be irresponsible as a friend not to bring it up.

One evening, they were sitting on his couch, barely paying attention to whatever movie was playing, when Jonathan decided to confront him on this. He waited until Nancy left to go the bathroom, so they could talk a bit more privately.

“Hey, Steve?” Jonathan said cautiously, peering over at him slowly.

“What’s up?”

“Don’t you ever get lonely here by yourself?”

The question made Steve pause, appearing to be deep in thought. He seemed to avoid eye contact when he answered.

“It’s okay.” He shrugged, “It kinda helps me learn what it’s like to be independent, you know? Like I know how to be alone.”

The words felt rehearsed, as though he’d been telling himself that for his whole life. Jonathan recognized it well, as he often convinced himself of the same thing when his mother was overly busy and he had to more or less parent Will.

“Are you sure?” He paused before continuing, waiting before saying something potentially risky. “You know you can... You can always talk to me about anything. I know what it’s like to be by myself too sometimes.”

Steve seemed affected by this as he looked up at Jonathan, studying his face for the truth.

“Yeah, I know you do.” He said vaguely. His face gave away no clues.

Jonathan was about to ask for clarification when Nancy walked in. Their conversation hadn’t been a secret, but by the way Steve covered his solemn facial expression with a warm smile when she entered the room told Jonathan all he needed know. He would keep quiet about this for now, but he was still very concerned for his friend and was determined to help somehow.

It wouldn’t even be until weeks later that he would even work up the courage to suggest what he’d been thinking about. Jonathan knew Nancy had spent the night at Steve’s before, but this was different.

They were at Steve's house again, this time with Nancy and Steve cuddled up on his bed while Jonathan sat on the floor at the foot of the bed. Steve's long legs dangled over the edge and his feet were just to the left of Jonathan's head. They had spent a casual Saturday bouncing from house to house, activity to activity, but now they were relaxing, and a calm silence had settled over them as the sun went down. Jonathan wanted to ask them, but he wasn't sure how they would respond. Eventually, he decided to just go for it.

"What if we just stay over tonight?"

"What?" Nancy said dreamily, telling Jonathan that she had already started to fall asleep.

"Well, I know you two have already spent the night together before."

"You really *do* know." Steve snorted. Jonathan pretended he hadn't heard.

"But what if we all did? So Steve isn't all alone here."

"I'm totally fine by myself." He reassured them, but Jonathan could hear an edge to his voice, he was sure of it.

"My mom would kill me." Nancy said, her voice horrified as if she was already imagining the lecture from her mother.

"Oh, I guess she would." Jonathan said, the disappointment obvious in his voice.

"Just say you're too tired to drive tonight." Steve offered, surprising him with his cooperation with the plan.

"She probably wouldn't believe that."

"Well, why don't you just ask her? You could probably really pull on her heartstrings if you pulled that, 'I have no other friends besides them' thing you do." Steve said this matter-of-factly, as though he were commenting on the weather.

"What?" Jonathan turned around to look at both of them from his place on the floor.

"I do not do that, Jonathan. Don't listen to him." She sat up, combing out the tangles in her hair with her fingers.

"The worst she could do is say no, Nance." Steve said, rather reasonably, "Why not just ask?"

They both looked at Nancy expectantly, and Jonathan was actually surprised his suggestion had been received so well. Maybe this was a streak of good luck, and Nancy could continue it. After all, it would be a miracle if they said yes, but Nancy could be surprisingly convincing when she wanted to be. Eventually, she sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Fine, I'll call them. Let's go." She kicked her feet over the side of the bed, heading downstairs to where the home phone sat in its cradle. The boys surrounded her, anxious to see how the call would play out.

"Give me some privacy okay?"

"Come on Jonathan, let's let her do her heartstrings pulling thing in private." Nancy rolled her eyes and scoffed, but she was smiling as she dialed the number.

Steve gently placed his hand on the small of Jonathan's back, leading him to the living room. The casual contact surprised Jonathan, but also made him feel... initiated somehow? Casual contact was common between Nancy and Steve, and so for Jonathan to do the same for him made him feel... Well... Included. That was pretty normal, right? And if that was the case then what he felt for Steve couldn't really be a crush, right?

They both sat on the couch, with Jonathan as far from Steve as possible. He still wasn't really sure if these feelings were okay for a guy to be having about another guy, but he reasoned that his crush on Nancy proved that he wasn't totally fucked. Jonathan wasn't particularly religious, but Hawkins wasn't particularly open minded either. He didn't even want to imagine what people would say if they knew about his crush on two people, let alone that one was a boy. If he could just focus on Nancy, or even better, no one at all, then he would be okay.

Maybe these thoughts should have been more distressing, but

Jonathan had been lonely for so long that it was a relief to have people who seemed to care about him. In the moment, he didn't really care if his crushes would ever be reciprocated, (they probably wouldn't) he was just glad that he had friends who made him as happy as Steve and Nancy did.

That wasn't wrong, was it?

Sometimes though, he got carried away thinking about what it *would* be like to be with both of them. It was always late at night, when he'd toss and turn and wish someone was there with him. He imagined that what they were doing right now wasn't too far away from dating, if they were all together they would probably do what they always did, but with more kissing.

God, kissing. That was becoming a problem too. Jonathan wanted to kiss both of them. It was too weird for him, he tried to push it down, but he couldn't help it. They'd both smile at him, or maybe he'd tell a joke that cracked them both up, and he'd just feel a swell of... of some kind of *love* for his friends that he didn't want to hold back. Sometimes he had this fantasy of just like, kissing both of them and seeing what would happen. It was crazy, and he would never do it, but the idea never left his mind.

He wished he could talk to them about this, but Steve had called him a pervert so long ago, and even though he hadn't really meant it at the time, it had still stuck with him.

He was so afraid that these feelings made him creepy or gross.

He didn't want to lose the only friends he had because of some weird feelings that he knew would never be reciprocated.

He didn't say anything *because* of how much he cared for them! Was he still a pervert if he genuinely loved them? If he wanted them to be happy?

"Wow." Nancy said, striding casually into the room and interrupting his train of thought. Her tone said dejected, which was concerning for Jonathan.

“What’d she say?” Steve asked curiously, leaning his cheek on his open palm.

“She said yes.” Jonathan now realized that what he had previously identified as dejection was merely confusion. Steve smiled, but Jonathan crinkled his brows, more confused than ever that his idea was coming to fruition.

“Seriously? How’d you get her to say yes?”

“She pulled at the heartstrings! Good job, Nancy!”

“Maybe I did employ a little bit of a heartstrings tugging method.” Nancy giggled softly to herself and joined them on the couch, slotting herself neatly in between the two boys.

“So, I guess a sleepover is on, then?” Steve looked over at Jonathan, waiting for his approval.

“Yeah, let me just call my mom and let her know.” He replied, standing up and making his way to the phone.

His call was much shorter, with his mother just relieved that her oldest son had made some friends who wanted to hang out with him. It was almost embarrassing, but he couldn’t be too upset as he knew she meant well. He said a quick goodnight to her and Will before heading back into the living room to see Steve examining his movie collection in the cabinet underneath the TV.

“What are you in the mood for, Jonathan?” He asked, still examining the titles.

Jonathan sat on the couch, nervously fiddling with a loose string on one of the cushions, refusing to look at either of them.

“You know what I always want to watch.” Nancy said, a little coyly, as though she knew her suggestion might be turned down.

“What is it?” Jonathan said, glancing over at her.

“Have you ever heard of Rocky Horror Picture Show?” Nancy’s eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement.

“Uh, I think so. What is it?”

“It’s Nancy’s favorite musical.” Steve pulled out the tape, handing it to Jonathan to examine. The artwork didn’t provide any insight to the plot of this musical, but it looked bizarrely up Nancy’s alley. She always had a penchant for the strange, her friendship with Jonathan was evidence enough of that.

“We don’t have to watch it, I mean Steve and I watch it almost every time I come over.”

“We can watch it.” He said, turning the case over to scan the brief summary on the back. Truth be told, musicals weren’t really his thing, and this one sounded seriously strange, but Nancy promised it would be good and he trusted her taste. Jonathan was mainly pretty interested in finding out what it was Nancy liked about this movie, since it looked so far from the things she usually liked. Steve of course had already seen the movie countless times, and regarded the experience with a level of apathy, but he obliged Nancy as always, taking the tape from Jonathan and loading it into the tape player with a soft hiss.

His first impression was, well, confusion. The plot seemed erratic, and the musical numbers while catchy didn’t seem to help explain much. Nonetheless, Nancy seemed enthralled with the movie, as if it was her first time watching it. Jonathan was reminded of the art museum, the way her mouth opened just slightly, her eyes shining as she took in all the art around her.

He glanced at Nancy out of the corner of his eye, and noticed Steve trying to hide his grin. Jonathan immediately looked back at the screen, having been caught peeping at his friend’s girlfriend. A red blushed crept up his cheeks, and he hoped no one would notice.

About halfway through the movie, Nancy paused it with a shiver. The boys turned to look at her, curious as to why she’d stopped it.

“It’s so cold in your house, Steve. I’m going to get a blanket.” She plodded up the stairs, presumably to grab the big quilt at the end of his bed. They stared at the paused screen, 70’s glam rock and 50’s sci-fi melding together on screen in a way Jonathan had never seen

before. He was pretty sure he'd heard of this movie before, but he didn't expect it to be so...

"She really likes this movie." Steve said, interrupting his train of thought. He pulled his feet up onto the couch, his knees touching his chest. That sweet smile seemed plastered on his face, and sometimes looking at Steve felt very much like looking into the sun. Jonathan felt like he needed to shield his eyes.

"Yeah, she does." He agreed easily, "What do you think of it?"

"It's pretty cool, but I mostly like how much she likes it."

He simply nodded at that, not wanting to talk about how Steve had caught him staring at Nancy. His tone was friendly, but Jonathan wasn't sure if that would change. He wasn't sure if he would be scolded for staring like a pervert again. It was paranoid to think Steve would suddenly turn on him, but the thought always lingered at the back of his mind. It was the one thing he really worried about.

"I noticed you staring at her." Steve said finally, and Jonathan looked down at his own hands, picking his nails in the way that Steve often did. The habit had rubbed off on him.

"Hey, Jonathan." His tone was much gentler, which shocked him. He looked up, trying to look as innocent as possible. Nothing weird was happening right now, he convinced himself. They were just talking.

"I don't mind if you look at her that way."

"What?" Jonathan's voice squeaked embarrassingly, but his voice was almost above a whisper. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. This felt wrong somehow. Did Steve mean it in the way that he'd hoped he'd meant it?

"She doesn't mind either." He added, voice subdued and face unreadable.

Was this a test? Jonathan gaped, unsure of how to reply to that.

Luckily, Nancy returned with the blanket before Steve could explain further, and the strange moment between them ended tragically soon.

“Is this okay?” Nancy said, spreading the quilt over all of them and getting comfortable. They both nodded, and the movie resumed. However, Jonathan couldn’t help but notice Steve stealing little glances at him for the rest of the evening.

Eventually, and he didn’t really care to know who initiated it, Steve and Nancy were both leaning into Jonathan. The blanket was cozy, but it wasn’t that big, and over the course of the movie they’d just snuggled closer and closer until Steve’s head was resting on Nancy’s shoulder, and Nancy’s head was resting on Jonathan’s. He couldn’t really focus after that, the place where Nancy’s head was resting seemed to sizzle with electricity, and he felt it was a miracle she wasn’t feeling what Jonathan felt. His heart was beating a mile a minute as Steve’s words kept replaying in his head. They *both* didn’t mind? *Steve* didn’t mind? What had happened to the possessive Steve he’d met at the beginning of the year? He knew they’d made progress in their friendship, but he never thought that had changed. He never thought that a change like this would even be in the realm of possibilities, if Steve had been implying what Jonathan thought he’d been implying. Part of him desperately hoped he was, but another part was terrified of what that would mean. No one had ever expressed any interest in Jonathan before, and he didn’t really even know what attraction looked liked, but had Steve been looking at Jonathan like that? His head was racing with possible explanations for their puzzling conversation, but he was jarred out of his train of thought as the credits began to roll and Nancy started shifting around on the couch.

“Did you like it?” She said, turning to Jonathan expectantly, eager to hear what he thought.

“It was...” He didn’t really know what to think. The parts he’d seen he had enjoyed, but Jonathan had been distracted for a large part of the movie.

“You don’t have to lie to her, man.” Steve chimed in suddenly, chuckling softly.

“It is kind of a weird movie, but I like it.” Nancy shrugged, turning to pop out the VHS tape and return it to its sleeve.

“No, I liked it!” Jonathan reassured them, “I’ve just... I’ve never really seen anything like that before, but it was good.”

They both looked at him then, as if sizing him up, deciding whether he was telling the truth or not. Apparently Nancy believed him, because she smiled and returned to the couch.

“So where’s everyone sleeping?” Nancy asked. Steve seemed at a total loss as to what to do.

“I uh, I don’t really know.” He chuckled, “I’ve never had a real sleepover before.”

“I’ll take the loveseat.” Jonathan said, quickly hopping over to the lone couch across the room and making himself at home.

“You want me to get you a blanket?” Steve offered, standing up to go get one before he’d even gotten a reply. Suddenly, it was just Jonathan and Nancy. The spaces between the two couches felt like an ocean, and he couldn’t help but remember what Steve had been saying earlier. What did that even mean? Luckily he didn’t have to talk to Nancy about it, as Steve returned as quickly as he’d left. He tossed the blanket to Jonathan and headed over to the movie cabinet.

“Anyone got any last requests?” Steve said, lazily scanning the movies.

“I’m probably going to fall asleep to whatever you pick.” Nancy yawned, already cozy on the couch.

“No requests, Jonathan?” Steve asked, looking over at him curiously.

“No.” He said, shaking his head, “I’m good with whatever.”

Steve looked between them before just turning on live TV and switching off the lights. Jonathan got comfortable on the loveseat and watched Steve join Nancy on the big couch.

It made sense for him not to join them, obviously. For a whole host of reasons, he had no reason to be sharing the couch with them. Of course... That didn’t stop him from wondering.

The group chatted idly for a bit before one by one, their replies grew more and more hazy until they stopped all together. Jonathan drifted in and out of sleep, lulled by the voices of late night programming. He didn't stir fully until about 10 AM, when he was roused awake by the sounds of a TV preacher advocating for "clearing your heart of sin", and turning away from "ungodly forces."

It was probably a sign meant for him. Blinking away grogginess, Jonathan looked around, noticing the couch Steve and Nancy had been sleeping on was empty. He stood up and headed to kitchen to look for them when he heard some frantic whispering. He paused, waiting to reveal himself.

It wasn't right to eavesdrop, but after the night he'd been having he felt he was due a little bit of curiosity.

"Does he know that, though?" That sounded vaguely like Steve's voice, but he couldn't be sure.

"...Didn't tell him..." That was Nancy, her voice fading in and out like a broken radio. He thought he heard his name a couple times, but that could've been anything, they were doing an expert job at making their conversation nearly indecipherable. Most of what could be heard were the outlines of conversation, more of a suggestion of words rather than the entire sentence. Eventually, Jonathan realized he wouldn't get anything out of listening in and decided to make his presence known. He strided casually into the kitchen, nodding at the pair and saying nothing.

They both stopped mid-sentence, surprised to see him. Whatever they had been talking about, it probably *had* concerned him.

"Sleep well?" Nancy asked, the first one to break the silence between them. She wrapped Steve's quilt tighter around her shoulders like a cape.

"Yeah, I slept okay." He shrugged, then looked at Steve, "What about you?"

"Me? I slept fine." He nodded, casting Nancy a sidelong glance.

Steve and Nancy had gotten particularly good at communicating without speaking, and while Jonathan had begun to pick up these signals, he still wasn't as adept as the two of them. This was why although he could tell the two were sharing a look that must've meant *something*, he couldn't tell what it was they were trying to tell each other.

Jonathan looked down at their feet, they were standing in a kind of small semi-circle. With Steve and Nancy leaning against the countertop, and Jonathan's feet the outsider among them.

The night had been confusing, but overall very good, so he didn't know why he felt so lonely. He shook his head, trying to clear any negative thoughts that threatened to taint their weekend.

"Anyone want breakfast?" He offered with a weak smile.

Notes for the Chapter:

the support ive been getting for this is really awesome. kind of a lot of pressure, because i dont want to disappoint anyone. but thank you for everyone who has sent me nice comments. i havent gotten a rude one so dont even worry about that. :+)

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

bitch i really thought this would be the last chapter
fml bitch i really thought wtf lmfao i really thought
this would be the last chapter? fuck me

It wouldn't be until several weeks later that Rocky Horror would even come up again.

Jonathan had more or less forgotten about the movie as soon as they'd watched it, especially considering that that night he'd been a little... distracted. It had certainly seemed interesting, but his mind had been racing to try and work through the tangled mass of his thoughts. So as a result, most of the plot was lost on him.

The next morning, he'd scraped together enough basic ingredients from the sparse pantry in Steve's house to make a decent breakfast for all of them. The conversation throughout certainly wasn't as weird as the one Jonathan had attempted to eavesdrop on, and it made his conversation with Steve last night seem more and more like a dream. When Jonathan had left that afternoon, they'd all said a warm goodbye and the exchange from the previous night hadn't seemed so weird anymore. They even ended up having a couple sporadic sleepovers after that that were more on par with their usual shenanigans, so maybe he really had just been overreacting.

Maybe this was just a classic case of Steve Harrington brand social ineptitude. It made more sense than his former theory, anyway. As charismatic as he seemed, Steve was actually a very awkward guy when it came to explaining himself. He'd always say unexpected things off the cuff, never quite comprehending that not everyone was on the same wavelength as him and would appreciate his input. Of course, he was weird in an entirely different way than Jonathan, or even Nancy.

Because really, Jonathan had come to learn that they were all kind of weirdos, in a way, it was what drew them together.

On one of the rare days that he hadn't slept over at Steve's house, he awoke to his phone ringing in his ear. The fact that Jonathan's phone was ringing at all was a surprise.

His mother had gotten it for him after everything that happened with Will. She'd called it a "backup phone" but he knew it was a subtle suggestion that he make some more friends. Steve and Nancy were the only ones who really called him now, and the phone had been left untouched until he became closer with them. Eventually, even their calls were rare. The two much preferred to show up on his porch unannounced, knowing somehow that Jonathan would be waiting for them.

They were never wrong, either.

"Hello?" He said groggily, rubbing his eyes and balancing the phone between his cheek and shoulder.

"The Irving Theatre is having a midnight showing of Rocky Horror in three weeks."

"Steve?" Jonathan rasped before clearing his throat. Steve acted as if he hadn't heard him.

"We should all go, for Nancy's birthday. What do you think?"

He scrubbed at his eyes and sighed. This phone call was just a glaring reminder that a couple months ago it would've been inconceivable that Steve Harrington, the same Steve Harrington that he'd punched in the face, would have invited him to a movie with Nancy, let alone that he would even call him. They'd made a lot of progress in a short amount of time, that much was obvious.

"Where's the Irving Theatre?" Jonathan asked after a brief pause. There was only one movie theatre in Hawkins, and he seriously doubted they would show anything so over the top.

"It's in the city."

"How did you even find out about this?"

"Nancy went once for Barb's birthday, it's how she got into Rocky

Horror in the first place.”

Steve said this very slowly, as if trying to cushion the blow of the words. It wasn't for no reason, either. They were still mostly tip toeing around the Barb situation, with Nancy as well as each other.

“Oh.” Jonathan replied, suddenly feeling very guilty for having paid so little attention to the movie. It was clear the film was one of Nancy's concrete connections to her missing friend, and he'd been more focused on his pathetic unrequited crushes.

“But, yeah. Do you wanna go? I'm buying the tickets in advance so we can skip the chaos, plus I think we should present them to her all fancy and stuff, when she least suspects it.” His smile seemed audible in every word, and Jonathan could practically picture the mischievous smile Steve must be sporting. It helped elevate his mood just a little bit more than he'd prefer it to, but for now he didn't let it bother him.

“Yeah I'll go, how much are the tickets?” He said, schooling his voice to sound casual. In actuality, Jonathan was just hoping the tickets wouldn't be too expensive for him to feel guilty about buying. On the other hand, he'd definitely feel guilty if he didn't go. Damned if you do, damned if you don't, he guessed.

His mother always told him it was okay to treat himself every now and again, but Jonathan still couldn't comprehend that. He was still used to clipping coupons, taking deals where you could get them. It was almost unimaginable to spend some money on yourself for no reason at all. Their family wasn't rich, and he was going to be putting himself through college soon. Anywhere he could cut back would be beneficial in the long run. Right?

That idea had been less complicated when Jonathan didn't have friends. Now, there were factors outside of his own wants vying for his money.

“It doesn't matter, I'll cover it.” Steve answered firmly, interrupting Jonathan's train of thought.

“Come on, it's Nancy's birthday, not mine. You don't have to pay for

me.”

“No way! Think of it as a gift to you too. Just take it.” This was just getting irritating to him now. It wasn't like Jonathan was little orphan Annie, just waiting for someone to whisk him away to a life of luxury. He didn't need anyone's charity.

“I'm not dirt poor you know. You don't have to treat me like a charity case.” Jonathan said testily.

“You think that's why I buy you stuff sometimes? Because I... Pity you?” Steve sputtered on the other end, clearly surprised by this admission.

“I know you do!”

“No way.” He scoffed, probably shaking that mop of hair furiously.

“We're friends, Steve, but sometimes you give me this look and it's like...” Jonathan trailed off, his anger was losing steam already. Truthfully, he didn't really understand why Steve did half the things he did, but Jonathan was more inclined to believe it was out of pity than anything else.

“Like what?”

“Nothing. I don't know.”

Sometimes talking to Steve was like biking down a steep hill, momentum would build and build between them until someone would pull back, wheels squealing to a stop. He didn't know where this mood had come from, but it felt as though they were getting close to something important. The end of the hill was coming, but Jonathan was the only one pulling back. Steve was pushing them both forward. The phone felt impossibly heavy in his trembling hand.

“I don't buy you things because I feel *bad* for you.” Steve began, punctuating his sentence with a guilty sigh. “I do it because I like you, and that's just how I show it.”

“You...?” Jonathan's heart was pounding in his ears, barely comprehending the words.

"Ask Nancy, she'll probably agree. It's sort of how I show affection."
She'll agree?

"Oh, I didn't... I guess I just thought..." Jonathan stammered nervously, feeling incredibly embarrassed at his outburst as well as incredibly confused at what Steve meant by affection. "I'm sorry."

"No it's okay. I understand."

The line went silent for a long time, until Steve cleared his throat and continued where they'd left off.

"Tickets are six dollars. You can pay me back or not, but I'm just gonna buy them myself for now."

"Okay." He nodded in understanding before realizing Steve couldn't actually see him.

"I'm sorry for insulting you, I didn't know it came off that way."

Jonathan could tell that he really hadn't meant any harm by it. He sighed, scolding himself for being so quick to lash out. Steve was his friend, they'd moved past all their bullshit in the past. Jonathan had to remember that no one was out to get him anymore.

"It's okay. I guess I just... I don't know, sorry."

"It's really okay, let's just forget about this, huh? The movie will be fun! Nancy's gonna be so excited!"

Jonathan didn't even know he'd been holding his breath until he let it go in a quick exhale, like a balloon suddenly losing all its air.

"Yeah, she will." He smiled, a bit relieved that their little skirmish wouldn't affect the night they were planning. Steve had become pretty forgiving, especially with Jonathan. It was as touching as it was surprising. He wasn't sure if anyone would have imagined the kindness Steve dished out to them on a regular basis, but here it was. Just evidence of more progress, Jonathan supposed.

"Okay well, I'll talk to you later." Steve said excitedly, presumably off to buy the tickets, and without another word, the line went dead.

After that, it was very hard for Jonathan to keep the plans a secret from Nancy. He wasn't sure when Steve would present her with the tickets, but he was pretty sure he would know when it was about to happen. So all he could do was wait, trying not to engage too deeply when Nancy discussed plans for her birthday.

"I probably won't do anything." She said one afternoon after another rigorous study session.

"What?" Jonathan said, scanning the pages of his textbooks to understand her unprompted comment. Steve was dozing quietly on her bed.

"For my birthday," She clarified, shutting her textbooks and returning her notes to her binder.

"Why not?" Jonathan asked, cautious not to appear suspiciously invested.

It was driving him crazy not being able to tell her they had already *made* plans for her!

"I don't know." She shrugged, then sighed as she began to crack the fingers of her writing hand one by one. "I guess it would just be weird without Barb, you know?"

"Oh, right." Jonathan hadn't even considered that. "Well you don't want to be alone on your birthday, do you?" He offered a comforting pat on her shoulder. It didn't seem to reach her.

"No, I definitely want to see you guys," She glanced over at Steve, who was still out like a light. The sight of him cause a small smile to creep across her face. "I just don't know if I want to do anything fancy."

"Oh, well..." He stammered, looking over at Steve again, as if he could back him up somehow. "You know, we..."

"What?" She turned to face him.

Jonathan wanted to go along with the whole "surprise Nancy" thing, but Nancy was a planner. She liked to know everything she would be

doing, and once she made plans it was hard to shake her from those plans. If she didn't think anyone had plans for Saturday, then she'd probably plan something else and pulling her from those plans would be another mess entirely! He had to tell her, it was torturing him. Steve wouldn't mind, surely he wouldn't.

"Steve bought tickets to a midnight showing of Rocky Horror next Saturday, for your birthday." It came out in one breath, and Nancy's eyebrows rose quizzically.

"Really? Why didn't he tell me?"

"It was supposed to be a surprise! Don't tell him I told you, but I just hated watching you think we didn't plan anything for your birthday."

They both looked over at Steve, his hair a mess and his head half buried in her pillows.

"I won't say anything." She said, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

And true to her word, Nancy played a very convincing imitation of surprise when Steve did finally reveal the tickets to her, on *Friday* of all days.

"I told you she'd be excited!" Steve had exclaimed, elbowing Jonathan playfully.

His big dopey smile was endlessly endearing, and Jonathan could not help the blush that crawled up his cheeks. Nancy shot him a knowing look.

Now, she was meticulously doing her makeup, something Jonathan had never seen her do before. Or at least, not on this scale.

Instead of neutral colors and small lines trying to stay subtle, Nancy was making broad strokes with her eyeliner, wings swooping longer and longer in an arc that demanded attention.

She applied it studiously, if that were even possible, and Jonathan couldn't help but find himself getting lost in the process. Nancy getting ready felt ceremonious, and he felt a strange sense of honor twist through him at getting to watch.

“Jonathan?” She put down the brush she’d been using to tease her hair, turning from the mirror to face him.

Steve hadn't gotten here yet, so it was just the two of them.

“Sorry, what?” He realized she'd said something he completely missed.

“I said, is that all you're wearing?”

“I... I guess so. Why?”

“Well, it is *Rocky Horror*. I certainly wouldn't wear all *this* unless it was a special occasion.” She gestured at the makeup job.

“I don't really have anything.” He shrugged, looking down at his feet. He’d just worn one of his sweaters with a plain denim jacket. All his clothes looked essentially the same, and Jonathan wasn't exactly clear on the dress code for this kind of thing. Nancy thought for a minute, turning back to the mirror to peer thoughtfully at her own reflection.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, apparently coming up with an idea as she dived for the phone. Jonathan watched as she dialed, pretty sure of who she was calling. After a brief pause, his suspicions were confirmed.

“Steve! What are you wearing tonight?” Nancy paused, nodding periodically. “Can you bring something for Jonathan?” She glanced over at him, smiling brightly. Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“Nothing crazy!”

“You're no fun.” Nancy said, rolling her eyes right back at him. “No, not you, Steve. When are you getting here, by the way?”

Whatever he replied was apparently satisfactory, as she smiled before hanging up without another word.

“He's bringing something for you.”

“So, I heard.”

They sat in relative silence until they heard clumsy footsteps

bounding up the stairs. Nancy glanced at the door, no doubt about who the sound was coming from.

“Hey! Sorry I'm late!” Steve said, bursting through the door with something in his arms. Was that for Jonathan?

“It's okay. I'm almost done anyway.”

“Is that for me?” He asked, nodding at the bundle in Steve's arm. Steve grinned back sheepishly, as if caught doing something he shouldn't.

“Yeah, check it out.” He handed the garment to Jonathan, only to discover it was a well worn leather jacket.

“Oh, thanks.” He said, peeling off his own and replacing it with Steve's. Jonathan shoved his hands experimentally into the pockets, feeling the hard plastic of a lighter. He ran his hands over it, feeling the scratches on the case to the cool metal on top. Something about wearing Steve's jacket made him want to avoid eye contact with him. It was strangely comforting, and Jonathan didn't know what to think of that. He had seen this jacket before, Steve had worn it occasionally on the colder days in Hawkins, but he still wasn't quite sure how this would complete his “look.”

That is, until Nancy came at him with her tube of lipstick.

“Hey, what's that for?” Jonathan snapped, ducking away from her.

“Relax, it's for your costume! I don't have any fake blood or anything so this will have to do.” Nancy slowly reached her hand out to Jonathan's face, as if he were a skittish animal she was trying to feed. He glanced briefly at Steve, who was leaning in the doorway and pretending not to be watching them, before leaning in and allowing Nancy to rest her nondominant hand against his cheek. She carefully drew a line across his forehead, then another down the side of his face in small swoops to emulate blood droplets. He couldn't stop thinking about how soft her hand was against his face, and it filled him with a familiar private shame. Their faces were so close together, Jonathan was looking down at his hands clenched tightly to distract him from the traitorous thoughts that threatened to overwhelm him.

She's just doing your makeup, calm down, he thought to himself. But even that thought wasn't a condolence. This was such a strange situation as it was, he'd never done anything like this before.

The silence felt tense to Jonathan as he tried to picture each character in the movie and decide which one she was making him into. Finally, he remembered the character played by Meatloaf whose name currently escaped him. Jonathan had remembered him in particular because of how short lived his character had been, only appearing in one scene and being killed off at the end of it. He couldn't help but smile a little at the thought, chuckling softly to himself.

"What? Are you laughing at me?" Nancy said, removing her hand and leaning back to inspect her work.

"No, of course not."

"Well, there you go." She capped her tube of lipstick and returned it to the makeup bag on her vanity before standing up and joining Steve at the door. Jonathan followed suit, glancing at his reflection on the way out. Strange.

"You guys ready to go?" Steve said, looking between them both. In the time Jonathan had looked away Steve had put on some thick black costume glasses.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Jonathan said, looking up and down at his mostly plain getup.

"I'm Brad." He shrugged, smiling broadly.

"And you?" He turned to Nancy, who aside from her makeup was wearing an ordinary blue dress, one he'd seen her wear in the past.

"I guess I'm Janet." She looked over at Steve.

"You guess?" He shook his head. What had he gotten himself into?

"Your costume is cool, man. I'm jealous of you." Steve said as they walked downstairs.

"You look great." Nancy added, flashing him an excited smile that made his heart flutter. Jonathan felt ridiculous, but if it would make her happy he supposed he could put up with it for a night.

It was about 11:00 when they headed out, Nancy's parents had looked them up and down curiously and made her promise to call when the movie was over. She'd agreed, hastily leading Steve and Jonathan out the door.

"Why are we leaving this early again?" Jonathan asked when he'd buckled up in the backseat of Steve's car.

"Because I want to get a good seat! It is my *birthday* after all." Nancy's excitement filled up the whole car, as she talked endlessly about the evening's plans, turning around periodically to emphasize her excitement to him.

"They always yell out these certain rehearsed responses to parts of the movie, it's hilarious."

"How do they know when to say it?" Jonathan asked.

"People just go often enough that they pick it up, I guess." She shrugged, turning back to face the front.

"I heard they plant people in the audience who know all the lines." Steve added, tapping the steering wheel absentmindedly. His enthusiasm (or lack thereof) didn't curb Nancy's own, as she continued babbling unabated.

"I'm glad you've seen the movie too, it just makes the whole show easier to follow when you know all the songs."

"I probably won't know them as well as you." Jonathan chuckled, watching the way each stoplight lit up the wet pavement with hues of red and green. He reached for his camera and snapped a quick picture. The click of the shutter seemed to distract Nancy, who paused slightly in her rambling before continuing.

"I hadn't even seen the movie the first time Barb took me."

That atmosphere of the car seemed to tense up at that. Steve and

Jonathan hadn't really known Barb too well, but they knew her disappearance had really devastated Nancy. For her to bring her up so casually like this was strange for everyone, especially on her birthday.

"Yeah, I remember you telling me about that. You were so confused." Steve said, breaking the silence and trying to keep the conversation light. Nancy looked out the window, her gaze seemed far away.

Jonathan wished he could reach out to her, but he wasn't sure if he should disturb her, as she appeared to be lost in thought.

"She should be here." She finally said, her voice as distant as her gaze. Steve glanced over at her before biting his lip, brows furrowed in concern.

"Yeah, she should." He agreed solemnly, nodding at the road as though it would answer the questions Nancy had been looking for the answer to for months.

Despite what people thought, Jonathan knew she hadn't stopped hoping for Barb's return. He recalled one of their sleepovers, when Nancy and Steve had been entangled together as usual and Jonathan had been quietly pining (as usual). The TV was softly playing some late night infomercials, bathing the room in neon blue light and promises of free shipping.

"Sometimes," Nancy had begun, her voice sounding soft and far away. "I just think that she'll come back one Monday, like nothing happened."

Steve grunted incomprehensibly in response, his face buried in her shoulder. Jonathan remained silent, unsure if what he'd heard was real or not. They all seemed to float somewhere between awake and asleep, and she seemed aware of the fact that no one would remember this in the morning.

Now, he could tell she was wrestling with the same thoughts. He couldn't bear to hold back.

"It's okay, Nancy." Jonathan reached out from the backseat, patting

her shoulder comfortingly.

“Yeah, Barb would want you to be happy.” Steve took a hand off the wheel to reach for Nancy’s, she took his obligingly.

“I know.” She whispered, nodding to herself and squeezing Steve’s hand.

There was something in the gesture that looked brave to Jonathan. It was almost as if she was asserting her power over the grief, not even letting it take root on the fun evening ahead.

Jonathan’s hand on her shoulder, and Steve’s hand intertwined with Nancy’s seemed to link all of them, and she brightened significantly at the contact.

“It’ll be fun.” She said it as if the boys needed any convincing. Jonathan smiled and gently squeezed her shoulder.

“Yeah, it’ll be fun.” He agreed.

Steve simply nodded, silently watching the traffic as they drove through the city. Jonathan thought he could see him squeeze her hand.

The line was actually a lot longer than Jonathan had been expecting, and he was grateful Nancy had made them leave early. At the sight of the line, she seemed to perk up more, to the relief of both boys. Nancy seemed to have gotten her vigor back, which was surely a good sign.

They parked in the lot across the street, as close as the crowd would allow, and once again held hands as they crossed the street and joined the line. Jonathan couldn’t recall when holding hands had become the norm with them, but he guessed a lot of things slipped under his radar these days. He wouldn’t be the first one to say anything, though.

They were a only a couple feet from the entrance, and Jonathan spotted some people ahead of them who were dressed similarly to him, though with admittedly more impressive costume makeup. Most people didn’t even bat an eye at his appearance and it was reassuring

to know that he didn't look as weird as he felt.

It was about five after twelve when they finally opened the door. Nancy had been leaning against the wall with Steve, who had his hand around her waist. They had all been talking on and off since they'd gotten in line, growing more silent and more bored as time went on. At the news that the doors were opening Nancy came loose of Steve and looked ahead excitedly. Each step she took seemed preliminary to flight, and her small jumps of delight as she followed the crowd were endlessly endearing.

Nancy had infectious feelings. For Steve, it was his laugh, but for Nancy, it was the palpable glee that seemed to overcome her entire demeanor. It spread outward and swallowed both boys like a fever. Sometimes Jonathan couldn't even look at her directly, instead sending his wide smile at the ground. She was just too much sometimes, and it was overwhelming and amazing all at once.

Steve pulled out the tickets he'd gotten in the mail, dispensing them to Nancy and Jonathan respectively as they hurried to the door.

After the ushers let them in, it was a mad dash to keep up with Nancy. Although she had grabbed both of their hands and tugged them along behind her, it was easy to get lost when she was weaving through the crowds to get a good seat.

Eventually, they found their seats in the middle of the the third row. Nancy plopped herself down right in the middle while Steve and Jonathan joined at either side of her.

"Excited?" Steve asked.

Nancy nodded quickly, taking both boys' hands and squeezing.

"Thanks for this." She said, "And thanks for coming, Jonathan!"

They were both looking at him now, and Jonathan wondered if his heart would be racing like this the entire time. It was already a lot to take in, and it wasn't helping that Steve and Nancy looked amazing tonight.

"Of course." He said, cautiously letting out a small grin of his own,

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Notes for the Chapter:

idk i think there gonna be one more chapter but like
i thought this was gonna be a one shot so actually
dick me down i am passionate bussin it open for the
ot3

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

i probably still have some editing to do on this, but here it is.

The show passed by in a frenzied blur of color and sound. Jonathan had been nervous, but once the show started he could see why Nancy loved this so much. The air was buzzing with energy, and with so much going on, Jonathan found he couldn't stay focused on any one part for too long. He'd alternate between looking at the screen, to the cast shadowing each scene of the movie, to Steve and Nancy. He spent a lot of time just staring at them, their reactions just as exciting as the show itself. Watching Nancy sing along to every song, mouth syncing up perfectly with the vocals, was mesmerizing. Even Steve, who had acted apathetic about the movie, was loudly cheering along with the crowd and occasionally flashing both Nancy and Jonathan a bright grin.

"That's you!" Nancy exclaimed when the undead Meatloaf emerged from the deep freeze, belting out his justifiable anger before getting quickly killed off.

"Eddie?" Jonathan said, mostly to himself. She smiled at him encouragingly and nodded.

"He's the cool one." Steve added, tapping his plastic glasses "I'm just Brad." Jonathan smiled. Steve would never be *just* anything to anyone.

They were both smiling back at him now, and for some reason Jonathan couldn't seem to wipe the goofy grin off his own face. The conversation was swept up and faded into the din of loud music, but he couldn't keep his mind off both of them for more than a couple of minutes. For once, it felt marvelous instead of terrifying.

The whole night Jonathan was snapping pictures, physically as well as mentally. Electricity seemed to pulse through the air that night. He felt impossibly wired, but most importantly, he didn't want to forget

a single thing. For example, Jonathan took a picture of the shadow cast backlit by the strobe lights, but committed to memory Nancy's smile as he left the camera untouched. If he could, he would've taken a picture of the way the two had made him *feel* that night. It would've conveyed the way his heart couldn't stop racing just sitting next to them, the way his palms got sweaty from being clenched together as he resisted the urge to move a stray hair from Nancy's face.

He could never share something like that, so it was just as well that he commit it to memory anyway.

Jonathan knew he would never be with Nancy and Steve, they were both so far out of the question for a multitude of reasons. For now, however, he had this wonderful night with them and that was all that mattered. He would savor each moment between them and maybe in some small corner of his brain he could pretend this had been a date between the three of them. What was the harm in fantasizing a little? Was it still perverted if no one got hurt?

Though the show ran late, when it finally ended none of them felt as tired as they probably should've been at that hour.

"So, should we go grab something to eat?" Steve suggested as the credits rolled, removing his costume glasses and putting them in his pocket.

"Definitely!" Nancy exclaimed, nearly jumping up from her seat. "I'm starving."

Something about the show had left them wide awake and ravenous. Similarly, something about the show had left Jonathan feeling ravenous and vulnerable in a way he didn't care to think too hard about. They shuffled through the crowd until they were back outside, surprised to find it was almost 3am by the looks of things.

"What's open?" Jonathan asked. The group looked both ways before joining hands and crossing the nearly empty street. Steve's hand seemed to fidget, while Nancy's had a firm grasp on Jonathan. The warmth of his friends hands made him shiver.

"I don't know, why don't we drive around and find out?" Steve suggested, looking between Nancy and Jonathan eagerly. The prospect of exploring the city at such an odd hour seemed to further fuel Nancy as her infectious excitement started kicking up again.

"Let's do it!" She replied, hopping into Steve's car as quickly as possible. Jonathan briefly remembered she was supposed to call her parents when the movie was over, but for now he kept his mouth shut.

It really was a miracle that none of them were feeling tired yet.

Despite the late hour, the city felt vibrantly alive. Jonathan had read about bioluminescence once, the way insects and sea creatures evolved to emit a soft glow, and he swore he could observe it here. Each stoplight was a creature all its own, an entirely different species from the late night diners packed with fellow night owls, to the 24 hour laundromats with their fluorescent lights and tumbling machines. This city was an ecosystem, and one he was more than excited to be observing.

"What about there?" Steve said, nodding at the bright yellow glow of a Waffle House sign.

"Waffle House?" Nancy repeated, looking back at him curiously. "Sound good to you Jonathan?"

"I'm fine with whatever." He replied, counting the crumpled bills in his wallet as quietly as possible. He had about ten bucks on him at the moment. Yeah, Waffle House was fine. Waffle House was cheap. It would be good.

"As you wish." Steve said to no one in particular as he pulled easily into the parking lot.

It was only when they were outside the diner that Jonathan remembered the lipstick Nancy had smeared across his forehead hours earlier.

"Oh, what about my...?" He gestured to his head.

"They've probably gotten weirder at this hour." She shrugged,

holding the door open for him.

Though true, Jonathan didn't feel too comfortable with presenting himself to the overworked employees of Waffle House like this.

"Well, I'm gonna wash it off." He replied once inside, heading straight to the nearest restroom. It was empty and deathly quiet, a sharp contrast to the noise of Rocky Horror. Jonathan leaned in close to the mirror, studying the smeared red mark. It was almost reminiscent of the times he'd fallen asleep in class, rare as they were. He didn't like making a habit of it, but it had been hard to get a good night's sleep after everything with Will. Jonathan would wake up at the end of class, jolted by the bell. He'd always feel groggy and his forehead would be red from being pressed against the desk.

"You okay there, Byers?" Steve would say as he passed. Jonathan had always ignored him, had thought the remark was meant to be mocking, but now...

"You alright in here?" Steve said, startling him with his sudden appearance.

"What? I'm fine." He said, grabbing some paper towels and attempting to scrub off the makeup.

"Tonight was fun, right?"

Steve was leaning against the wall, right by the single stall. His hands were in his pockets but Jonathan could tell, even through the fabric, that they were twitching.

"Yeah." He replied, "Very fun." An uncomfortable silence settled between them, with Jonathan scrubbing at his face and Steve watching almost intently. He would've been more put off by this, except the lipstick really wasn't giving up. It even seemed to have gotten worse, so it was his primary focus at the moment. Steve sighed and moved from his place by the stall.

"That's not how you do it, man." He said, grabbing one of the crumpled paper towels and running it under the faucet for a few seconds.

Oh, of course water would help. Duh. Jonathan turned to him, about to reach out for the damp paper towel when Steve grabbed his chin, angling it slightly upwards. His breath hitched, his entire body seemed to freeze.

“Hey, relax.” Steve said softly, looking down at Jonathan. “I’m not gonna hurt you.” He began to lightly dab his forehead. Jonathan could feel his hands trembling. He had nowhere else to look but Steve’s face, it was just too much.

“I... I got it, okay?” Jonathan insisted, pulling away from his grip tragically soon. A small part of him instantly regretted the action. He grabbed another paper towel and ran it under the faucet, just like Steve had done. Something about what had happened must’ve struck him funny, because now he couldn’t stop smiling. It was the worst kind of Steve Smile too, a smug grin that seemed to imply he knew something you didn’t. It was subtle but so insufferable, and Jonathan had seen it many times before. Now, however, the sight of this only caused him to become further flustered. Why was he messing with him like this? Was this a joke?

“Suit yourself.” Steve said with a casual shrug as he leaned against the stall once more. “I’ve just seen Nancy do it.”

“Okay.” He replied. Jonathan’s hand was trembling even more as he wiped the makeup off, and he hoped Steve wouldn’t notice. It actually worked fairly easily, for that he was grateful. The lipstick was quickly fading from his forehead, and Jonathan felt confident enough to go back out there.

“Come on.” He said, nodding to the door before heading out. Nancy had saved them a nice booth by the window. Jonathan was prepared to take the seat opposite of her, as was customary in all their other outings. This time, however, Steve slid into the empty bench, leaving him with a choice he’d never had to make before. Fuck.

It probably wasn’t that big of a deal, but it came as such a shock that Jonathan didn’t know what to do. Tonight was already weird, and he wasn’t good with random changes like this.

Realizing he was floundering, Nancy patted the seat next to her,

gesturing for Jonathan to join him. Steve eyed him curiously as he slid in next to Nancy. Without another word, they all buried themselves in the menu. Jonathan was relieved the awkward moment had ended, but now all he could think about was Steve. Steve, Steve, Steve. Out of the corner of his eye, Jonathan could see him looking at them both. It gave him goosebumps in the weirdest way. What he was doing to him wasn't fair, because surely he must know right? Steve wasn't totally oblivious. The face thing... That was weird right? What *was* that? Jonathan's stomach clenched at one thought in particular that rose above the rest, so undeniable he felt as though he'd been slapped in the face with it.

Whatever it was, he wanted Steve to do it again.

"What are you gonna get, Jonathan?" Nancy asked. Steve pretended to look up as though he hadn't been staring.

"Probably just coffee." Jonathan wasn't feeling very hungry anymore.

"You're not gonna get a waffle?" She sounded incredibly distraught by this, he couldn't help but smile at her antics.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I'm not gonna get a waffle either." Steve added, shooting a sly glance at Nancy.

"That's ridiculous! What are you going to get?"

"Maybe I'll get the..." He glanced down at the menu, scanning it before choosing something seemingly at random. "The All-Star Special."

"That comes with a waffle."

"What? No it doesn't."

"Yeah, it does." Nancy pointed at the picture on Steve's menu. "What is this?" She quipped sarcastically.

"She's right, Steve." Jonathan said. He could feel himself smiling widely, but for once it didn't make him cringe.

"Then I'll just get the two egg breakfast." He replied, crossing his arms stubbornly.

"Not getting waffles at Waffle House." She grumbled and shook her head, "Ridiculous."

Eventually the waitress came, looking surprisingly crisp for a night shift. They ordered quickly and without any issue, their food coming in almost record time. However, with the restaurant nearly empty it wasn't that much of a surprise. The only sounds between the group were periodic clicks of Jonathan's camera and the clinking of silverware against plates. It was actually really nice.

If there was one thing he especially liked about Steve and Nancy, it was that they never felt the need to fill the silence with unnecessary conversation. What often kept him so distant from his peers was their constant need to talk, but talking wasn't necessarily communicating. Jonathan much rather preferred their conversations meant something instead of talking just to talk, and his friends seemed to understand that. For example, instead of either of them breaking the silence, they were quietly eating their meals while Jonathan snapped pictures of the cars passing by outside.

Ironically, it ended up being Jonathan who broke the silence. Returning his camera to his neck, he looked over at Nancy's decimated waffle.

"Enjoying your birthday Nancy?" He asked before taking a sip of his coffee.

"It's technically not my birthday anymore, because it's 3am." She replied matter-of-factly, in typical Nancy fashion. This quickly baited Steve into the conversation, who scoffed and flapped his hand in her direction dramatically

"Oh please." He said, "It's your birthday until the night is over."

"Well what if I just never go to sleep, then would it be my birthday forever?" She yawned then, almost as if to punctuate her statement.

"I think you just answered your own question." Jonathan said,

sending his grin down at the table.

He'd never really believed that high school was the best time of your life, but with Nancy and Steve he could almost believe it. Even though most of his high school years had been spent alone, the months he'd spent with them had been the best so far. Just talking to them was so nice, like salve on a wound.

"Should we head out?" Steve asked, drumming his fingers against the table and looking back at him. Jonathan hadn't even realized he'd been staring. Something strange seemed to happen then, as Steve and Nancy shared a particularly tense look. They were both quirking up their eyebrows, as if to better broadcast their hidden messages. Then, just as fast as the look appeared it disappeared before his eyes. Jonathan looked between them, trying to figure out what had just happened.

"You look tired, Byers." Steve remarked with a grin.

"Yeah, let's go." Nancy agreed, suddenly avoiding eye contact with both boys.

Jonathan slid out of the booth, following the two to pay for his coffee up front. The single coffee barely made a dent in his impressive ten dollars, but he still flinched at the exchange. The entire time Steve kept glancing at him out of the corner of his eye, almost apologetically. He observed the way Nancy begrudgingly dug through her coin purse to give the cashier exact change. *Spending money just sucks no matter what*, Jonathan reasoned.

In the parking lot, Nancy surprised him again. Instead of getting into the passenger seat, she followed Steve to get in the backseat on his side.

"Should I...?" Jonathan began, hesitating between the doors of the front and the back seat. They'd never done this before either. This whole thing felt like much more than just a seating arrangement. Was Nancy just breaking their traditions because it was her birthday and she was feeling reckless or something? What was this?

"I'm just going to uh—" She looked at Steve and gestured at the car

vaguely. This seemed to make perfect sense to him for some reason, as he simply nodded and climbed into the front seat.

Nancy looked at Jonathan almost pleadingly before getting in the back seat. He sighed, rolling his eyes before joining her. She seemed to brighten exponentially at his presence in the backseat. He didn't really know why she was acting like this, but he'd be hard pressed to not oblige her on her birthday. Jonathan looked to Steve for help, but he seemed unaffected by any of this as he pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road.

"Here we go." Steve remarked quietly, mostly to himself. They had just begun the trek back home but Nancy was tapping her fingers against her legs impatiently. Jonathan leaned against the window, trying to forget every unexplainable thing that had happened tonight. It had been a fun outing among friends, that was all. It was late, they were probably acting weird because they were tired. Jonathan had had a coffee, and even he was feeling a little sleepy. He allowed himself to be lulled by watching the buildings and lights fade away into small, dark houses and fast food chains. If the city was an ecosystem, they were plunging into the depths of the ocean where the light didn't reach. The only thing that penetrated this near darkness were Steve's headlights and the green of every stoplight that let them pass.

"Jonathan." Nancy said softly.

"Huh?" He grunted in response. He'd just been on the edge of sleep.

"Do you remember Melissa Warren? From middle school?"

Melissa Warren had moved to Hawkins at the beginning of 7th grade, and just about all of Hawkins had quickly become obsessed with her. Jonathan had been among the majority, having had a painfully obvious crush on her until she moved away at the end of Freshman year.

"Yeah, why?"

"She used to have such a big crush on you." Nancy chuckled, smiling and shaking her head.

“What?” This was certainly news to Jonathan.

“I didn't really know you back then, but I had her in gym. She would never shut up about you.”

“Oh, I'm sure.” He rolled his eyes. “Not that it really matters.” Jonathan didn't even know where Melissa was now. What was the point in bringing her back up?

“Seriously, she did! Didn't she ever tell you?” Jonathan shook his head.

“Melissa never even talked to me. Besides,” He turned away from the window to look at her more closely, “What made you think of her after all these years?”

“I was just thinking how...” Nancy bit her lip, appearing to think something over. She looked nervous again, as if she were holding back. Jonathan noticed Steve glancing up at the rear view mirror to steal little looks at Nancy. He didn't know what any of this meant, but he said nothing. He didn't want to disrupt whatever was happening here. She shook her head before looking back over at him.

“I remember thinking back then, that I just didn't understand her crush on you, but now I-”

“Oh come on, Nancy.” He thought he knew where this was heading.

“What?” She appeared shocked he would interrupt her monologue, and in a way Jonathan was surprised at himself too. He couldn't believe they were even having this conversation.

“Stop... Whatever you're doing.”

“What am I doing Jonathan?” She crossed her arms firmly, looking very displeased.

“You don't have to... I know I'll never...” What was Nancy doing anyway? He took a deep breath before letting it go and beginning again. “I know you're with Steve, okay? I obviously respect that.” He glanced over at Steve, whose eyes were unwaveringly focused on the road. The admission didn't seem to surprise him one bit, it was as if

he hadn't even heard them.

"Jonathan, I—" But he cut her off, too emboldened to stop himself now. He distantly noticed Steve pulling into the parking lot of a 24 hour convenience store.

"You don't have to let me down easy like this. I pretty much knew from the beginning I had no chance with you."

"Oh my *god* ." Steve groaned as he parked the car. Jonathan was taken aback by his sudden interjection, as was Nancy.

"Steve, don't—" She began, but she was cut off once again.

"Just *tell* him, Nance." He turned off the car and whipped around in his seat to peer at both of them. "He's never going to *get it* unless you tell him." Steve emphasized his point by gesturing in Jonathan's direction.

"I *know* that!" She snapped back.

Now they were arguing? Oh great. Jonathan began reaching for the handle of the door.

"I think I'm just going to—" He began, but Steve cut him off again.

"No, *I'm* going inside. You're both going to stay here and just *talk* ." Without another word Steve left the car and headed into the shop, leaving them to their own devices.

The two were silent for a long time. Afterall, just because he was gone didn't mean Jonathan was just going to open the floodgates, and besides, Nancy didn't seem willing to start the conversation either. He tapped his fingers against his knees nervously, looking everywhere but Nancy's side of the car. Eventually, she broke the silence by mumbling something under her breath.

"What?" He looked over at her, the noise having startled him.

"I said, sorry about that." She clarified, a little bit louder this time.

"What is he talking about?" He whispered, as if Steve were listening

in somehow. Nancy unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned closer towards Jonathan. He did the same.

“He acts like I'm the only one hesitating,” She rolled her eyes before continuing, “But truthfully he's just as nervous to tell you this as I am.”

“Tell me what?” Jonathan was nervous too, *very* nervous in fact. She was talking as though what she was beginning to divulge was top secret, and it made his hands shake beyond his control. He tried to mentally beat back the anxious habit, but was unsuccessful in his attempts.

“It's kind of weird, so please promise to keep an open mind about this okay?”

“Okay.” He agreed quickly, shaking his head almost too vigorously. Jonathan straightened up, wringing his trembling hands and telling himself to *calm down*. The only light in the car came from the flickering lights of the convenience store, and it cast a sinister tint over Nancy's face. They were drifting quite close together now, and Jonathan couldn't tell if her eyes looked predatory or excited.

“Steve and I obviously love each other, but sometimes...” Nancy glanced at the convenience store, as if to include him in this conversation. “Well, sometimes we *both* wish you were... Uh...” She gestured between them, as if that were explanation enough.

“We just want you to be with both of us.” Jonathan stared back at her blankly. Was this really happening? Did she mean what he thought she meant?

“Like a regular couple... but with three people.” She explained this part hesitantly, almost like a question, and for once Jonathan had nothing to say. What *could* he even say at this point? He'd been imagining this moment for so long, but now when it had finally happened, he was coming up woefully empty. His hands were no longer shaking, but he wasn't sure that was exactly a good sign.

“Jonathan?” Nancy said, eyebrows knitted together in concern, “What do you think?”

He was about to respond when she put her hand on his leg. The noise died in his throat as he tensed up. Nancy squeezed gently, as though she were trying to bring the life back to him through contact. Jonathan didn't know what he thought, he couldn't think of anything besides her hand on his leg. She sighed and slowly withdrew her hand.

"It's okay if you're not interested, we understand. It's kind of weird."

The withdrawal was what finally snapped Jonathan back to his senses.

"No!" He snapped; Nancy's eyes went wide.

"What?"

"No, it's not weird." He laughed nervously, shaking his head, "Okay well, maybe it's a little weird, but..."

Jonathan took a deep breath as he prepared himself to say this next part, "I... I would like..." He gestured in the same way Nancy had, though this time the meaning behind it was undeniable clear.

"Really?" She beamed at him, and Jonathan simply nodded, a small grin betraying him.

He suddenly felt shy and excited all at once, but he definitely didn't want the feeling to stop.

"And he... He's okay with it too?" Jonathan asked, gesturing to the convenience store where Steve was still waiting for the conclusion to their conversation.

"Of course he's okay with it. He actually has a fairly big crush on you. We both do."

"Really? Since when?" This time it was his turn to be shocked.

"Since a little after New Year's, I'm pretty sure."

"Wow." He breathed, shaking his head slowly.

Of course, in hindsight it made sense. Jonathan had just been too busy wrestling with his own feelings to notice anyone else's, but upon further reflection he could think of a few times when *both* of them had expressed interest that wasn't platonic.

"Yeah..." Nancy said slowly. Her smile was beginning to seem like a permanent fixture on her face, and he wasn't complaining one bit.

Jonathan had never been the target of such a disarming smile before. He'd usually observed it as a spectator, but now it was focused directly on him and his thoughts were running wild.

In a bold move for Jonathan, he slowly reached forward, cupping her face in his hand. They fell easily into such tender contact, it was as though they'd both been doing this for years.

"Can... Can I kiss you?" He whispered. She nodded and leaned up to meet him halfway. Together, they crossed into uncharted territory as their lips crashed together.

The kiss itself started out quite tame, as they both grew accustomed to such an unfamiliar feeling, but Nancy wasted no time as she quickly parted his lips with her tongue. Jonathan let out a wordless cry from the back of his throat, but continued to reciprocate all her little ministrations. Her hand clutched at his shirt, pushing him further against the window as she kissed hungrily.

His free hand wrapped around her waist, as much for her benefit as his. He'd been waiting to do this for so long, he still couldn't believe it was even happening. His head was swimming, and his nerves felt like they were on fire.

Jonathan quickly pulled back as Steve opened the front door and climbed in, barely acknowledging both of them as he started up the car. Nancy appeared unashamed as she combed her fingers through her now tangled hair. She smiled at Jonathan and he noticed her red lipstick had smeared across her lips like a children's coloring book. He no doubt had his own similar smear pattern across his lips.

"I see you kids worked it all out." Steve observed, his voice giving nothing away about what he thought of the proceedings. He pulled

out and restarted the journey home. It suddenly hit Jonathan that what they'd just done was real, it had happened. What they'd done would be considered cheating to some, but there was no turning back now.

"Y-Yeah, we did." He replied, still hesitant to believe Steve was really as okay with all this as Nancy said. She reached out for his hand, and Jonathan took it without a moment's hesitation.

"So you're on board with this?" Steve asked, glancing up at him through the rearview mirror.

"Are *you*?" Jonathan asked, mostly to deflect the question, but also because he was genuinely curious.

"Of course I am, but you're the one whose opinion *really* matters right now."

It was unreal how calm Steve was throughout this whole experience. Considering how aggressive he'd been when they first met, and how high strung he'd been when they'd fought that monster, Steve's calm tone was almost uncharacteristic of him.

"Then... Yeah. I'm on board." Nancy squeezed his hand at this, running her thumb over his. The action sent butterflies fluttering through his stomach, a feeling entirely foreign to him.

This answer was apparently satisfactory, as Steve simply nodded without another word. Jonathan looked down at Nancy's hand entwined with his, then back up at her. She was already looking his way.

"You didn't have to stop." *Fuck.*

"I..." He must've looked pretty lost because she laughed again, cuddling close and wrapping her arms around his chest.

"Or we could just do this." The words vibrated against his chest.

"Okay." Jonathan said, just above a whisper. He cautiously wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin on her head. It was probably obvious to her that he'd never done anything like this before, but she

didn't seem to care as she cuddled close.

When Jonathan imagined holding Nancy like this, he didn't imagine that he would be thinking about Steve the whole time. Of course he was enjoying it all, but Steve's surprisingly calm demeanor was suspicious to him. She'd said that Steve had a crush on him too, but what if he was just tolerating this because he loved Nancy? He didn't seem upset at having caught them kissing, but that wasn't the point. Steve was prone to overreaction. All the time. It was one of the things Jonathan loved him for, but now he was just... Nothing. Monotonous, calm, quiet. This wasn't right, it didn't feel right, and Jonathan dwelled on it the whole way home.

Fortunately for him, no one else seemed to have anything to say, which gave him ample time to dwell on all the possible reasons behind Steve's silence. By the time they pulled up to Jonathan's house, he was already a bundle of nerves, but he was determined to get home without incident and go over the details of tonight on his own.

"Here we are." Steve said casually, opting to look ahead at his house instead of back at him. That certainly wasn't helping Jonathan's nerves.

"R-Right." He replied, looking down at Nancy.

At some point she had fallen asleep, so disentangling her from his arms without waking her proved to be tricky. Eventually, however, she stirred from her sleep, rubbing her eyes and murmuring vague sounds of confusion.

"This is where I get off." He whispered, easing her off of him the rest of the way.

"Wait a minute." She said, still groggy.

"What?"

Nancy grabbed the collar of Jonathan's jacket, (Steve's jacket) kissing him as insistently as her grogginess would allow. He smiled into the kiss, reaching up to cup her face and kiss back. Jonathan heard the

door in the front seat open as Steve once again left the car. He pulled back from Nancy, sure that this was the part of the night where Steve would snap at him, revealing that this whole thing had been a ruse.

“I... Happy Birthday.” Jonathan said weakly, opening the car door and leaving the comfort of the backseat. He could see Steve’s silhouette as he leaned against the car.

Jonathan started to pull crumpled bills out of his wallet as he walked towards him, counting what he thought was six, he couldn’t be too sure in the dark.

“Thanks for buying my ticket, man.” He held the bills out to Steve; it was the only thing he could think to do. If Steve wanted to kick his ass now, he’d been nothing but accommodating.

“Keep it.” He replied without turning towards him. “It’s just six dollars.” Jonathan nodded, not bothering to put up a fight this time.

“Okay, well...” He let out a half hearted wave, “Bye th-” That’s when Steve kissed him.

Jonathan let out a sound from the back of his throat that *definitely* wasn’t a whimper, stumbling back before Steve pushed him against the car. Jonathan sighed into the kiss. It felt different than Nancy, that was for sure. However, his limited experience with kissing hindered him from determining whether or not the kiss was different because it was *Steve* or because it was simply someone else. One thing he noticed immediately, however, was that Steve wasted no time bringing in teeth. Jonathan was hungrily trying to find balance between kissing and trying to get enough oxygen to his brain, but when Steve began gently nibbling on his lower lip all hope was lost. His breath hitched, and he let out a sound that hung between a moan and a particularly loud sigh. The kiss was a little bit more clumsy than Nancy, but that was mostly Jonathan’s fault. This whole experience was new to him. Before tonight he’d never kissed *anyone* let alone a *guy*. Two birds with one stone, he thought as he smiled into the kiss.

Steve pulled away, leaning forward to whisper into his ear, “I just wanted to say you look really *hot* in my jacket.” Jonathan merely

shivered in response, his hot breath giving him goosebumps as it rolled in waves over his neck. Steve slowly backed away, leaving him plastered to the car and breathing heavily.

“I...” Jonathan shook his head, unable to comprehend what had just happened. “I guess you *are* on board with... all this.”

Steve nodded, his smile looking quite ghoulish in the moonlight. “Yeah, I definitely am.”

He got back into his car, turning it back on and rolling down the window.

“So, I’ll see you around.” Steve said plainly, nodding at Jonathan as though they’d just made a business deal.

“Right.” Jonathan agreed easily, though truthfully, he was still just as confused after the kiss than he was before.

As Steve rolled up the window and pulled out of his gravel driveway, Jonathan couldn’t help but wonder if Nancy had heard any of that. Had she watched them? What did she think? Were her and Steve both just picking apart Jonathan’s kissing? These thoughts were at the forefront of his mind as he walked up the driveway, but as soon as he entered the dark house, they all faded into the foreground.

All of it could wait until tomorrow, he thought as he crash landed onto his bed. Even if this night was just... a slip in some of their sanity, he had quite enjoyed the kiss. Well, he had actually quite enjoyed *both* of the kisses he’d received tonight.

For now, that was all that mattered.

Notes for the Chapter:

i really thought this would be the last chapter im smh..... i think maybe i have ONE MORE chapter out of me but honestly like let's see how it goes i have too much to say.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

this took awhile to put out because ive been busy with school, and its like sexual and thats hard for me to write haha i never know if im being corny or not

Jonathan awoke that morning with his face buried in his pillows and someone knocking insistently on his door. It took him a few seconds to process that someone was trying to talk to him, their message coming out muffled from where he laid. He sat up in bed and listened closer, identifying the high pitched voice as his mother.

“Jonathan?” She called, “Your friends are here.” At the mention of his friends Jonathan perked right up. Could they even be classified as friends anymore? They'd clearly crossed *some* sort of boundary last night, but what were they really? Could three people even be together at the same time? He shook his head, getting out of bed and opening the door faster than was probably necessary.

He hadn't expected them to literally be at his door, but suddenly there was Nancy standing behind his mother, and Steve a bit behind her. They both looked uncomfortable standing out in the hallway, just as he felt uncomfortable being ambushed like this.

“Oh.” Jonathan said, surprised at their sudden appearance.

It wasn't until he saw everyone else that Jonathan realized how haggard he was. Steve's hair was expertly fluffed and held down by what looked like an entire can of hairspray, Nancy's clothes were perfectly crisp with not a wrinkle in sight. Even his mother, who often looked seconds away from a nap, had her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and looked well rested. Jonathan was still wearing the clothes he'd worn last night, his face marked with wrinkles as he'd fallen asleep against the sleeve of Steve's jacket. It seemed everyone had picked today to look amazing, leaving Jonathan looking like a slob.

“Can we...” Nancy began, cautiously breaking the awkward silence.

"Oh yeah, come in." He opened the door wider and stepped to the side, nodding at his mother, "Thanks, mom."

Luckily for him, she seemed to understand the importance of this visit and didn't hover around them for long. Jonathan just hoped that she didn't know *exactly* what was going on, or whatever was actually going on anyway, because he still wasn't quite sure.

Steve and Nancy stepped past Jonathan and into his room. He closed the door behind him and realized this was the first time in awhile they had actually seen his place in its entirety.

"Sorry about the mess," Jonathan said sheepishly as he kicked some clothes out of the way. "I wasn't expecting anyone." *I'm never really expecting anyone*, he wanted to say, but he just stuck to mess control while they looked around his room curiously.

"Oh, it's okay." Nancy smiled at him warmly. Although they bounced from house to house most weekends, Jonathan's was usually the last place they'd go to hang out. It was as much of his choice as it was the group's. Ever since they killed that *thing* he was always a little hesitant to stick around his house for too long, and he had a feeling they felt the same way. Even now, he could see the way Steve eyed the room with one hand clenched, his body language looking positively uneasy. Overall, Jonathan's house was just too isolated, there was nothing to do, and they usually only stopped by to whisk him away to whatever plans they had for the weekend anyway, so it all worked out.

The fact that they'd come over now for no apparent reason and with no plans to go anywhere was puzzling enough.

"We weren't really expecting to come, actually, but Nancy *really* wanted to." Steve said, making himself at home on Jonathan's bed and sending a teasing grin in Nancy's direction.

"Shut up!" Nancy rolled her eyes and joined Steve where he was leaning against the headboard. "We both wanted to come here." She clarified. They were getting quite close to each other now, he noticed they were holding hands.

"Aren't you guys tired?" Jonathan asked, nervously picking his nails. Rocky horror had left him feeling a little hungover, if that were possible, and while they looked put together their eyes were more tired than they let on.

"No way." Steve said, but he punctuated the statement with a yawn as he leaned against Nancy, which really wasn't helping his case.

"We wanted to talk to you." She said gently, taking Steve's hand and absentmindedly stroking it. Her eyes looked hopeful, and she seemed to be subtly telling him to join them. He was the only one not on the bed, and Jonathan desperately wanted to join them, but he was afraid of what that would mean.

"We *are* talking." He replied rather petulantly. He knew he was being annoying, but he couldn't help that he was nervous. Kissing in Steve's car at 3am was one thing, but lying in bed with them in the middle of the day was another thing entirely. Could they really be all that Nancy had said that they were? Was it really even possible? After all, they hadn't officially talked about this. Nancy had been too tired, and Steve wasn't exactly the master of communication.

They had only kissed, but then again, it hadn't *only* been a kiss to Jonathan.

"Come on, man." Steve said, openly gesturing him over. "Sit with us."

Jonathan couldn't really think of a reason to say no at this point. He walked over to his bed and sat himself cross legged on the foot of it, right at Steve and Nancy's feet.

"So you wanted to talk?" Jonathan said, as businesslike as he could manage with the only two people he cared about (aside from his family) cuddling in his bed. Steve was leaning his shoulder against Nancy's, lazily toying with a fray on her sweater. She batted his hand away, flashing him a quick grin before she cleared her throat, taking on a more serious demeanor.

"Well talk *more*, I guess." Nancy clarified, "About... All this."

"Right." Jonathan nodded, looking away from her pointed gaze.

They sat in a tense silence, no one wanting to be the first one to talk, and none of them knowing exactly how to begin.

“Well...” Steve said, looking between them expectantly.

“Well what?” Jonathan asked, looking up at him incredulously, “You can’t just put it all on us this time, you know.”

“What?” Steve sputtered back, and he seemed genuinely confused too. It was almost as if last night hadn’t even happened at all.

“*Communication* .” Jonathan quipped back sarcastically, “That thing you were so keen on Nancy and I doing last night w-when you...” He trailed off, the rest pretty obvious from there.

“Oh, right.” He paused, chewing on his thumbnail thoughtfully, “Well, that was different.”

Jonathan scoffed, looking pointedly at Nancy, “Do you hear this?”

“I’m staying out of this one,” She said, raising her hands and refusing to look at either of them.

“No way, Nance.” Steve said firmly, turning to look at her, “No one is staying out of this one. That’s the whole reason we even *came* here today.” Nancy was about to reply when Jonathan interrupted.

“I’m so tired of this...” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and groaning dramatically.

This whole thing had become so convoluted. How had they gone to be so open and close to each other, to abstaining from meaningful conversation and hiding their true feelings? He knew they all felt... some sort of regard for each other, and yet they were all too afraid to be open about it.

“Tired of what?” Nancy said, her entire demeanor softening as worry clouded her features.

“Not being honest with you guys, not talking about things we should talk about.”

“Not being honest?” Steve sounded concerned now too, his eyebrows knitting together.

They somehow managed to be so beautiful and so infuriating at the same time, and it was tripping him up. Jonathan quickly realized that they were never going to be the ones to start this conversation, at least not without some push back from him.

“I just...” He shook his head, looking at their feet as he said the next part, “I just... *love* you guys, okay? Why do I have to hide it?” The word *love* came out as a hesitant whisper, his voice trembling just slightly.

The room went deathly silent at his admission. He wasn’t even sure he heard anyone breathe. *Love* hadn’t been the word he was looking for, but once he said it, Jonathan realized how well it fit. And yeah, he supposed he did love both of them. In some way or the other, they were close. That was undeniable. Now, whether this love was platonic or romantic? Well... The line got a little blurry past there, but no one could say that he didn’t love his friends.

“You don’t have to hide it.” Steve said softly, “You don’t have to hide it at all.” He seemed appalled that Jonathan would even suggest that.

However, he was actually quite taken aback. Steve was the last person he expected to say something so... *Caring*. It only served to make Jonathan’s hands tremble more, and he shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He couldn’t let something like that distract him from actually *having* this conversation. He wouldn’t let his pathetic pining for them get in the way of this anymore.

“Then what are we?” Jonathan looked between Nancy and Steve, “What is this?”

It was kind of shocking how *they* were the ones who had come to him, and yet they looked so shocked by Jonathan’s honest question. What had they expected from this visit? What had their plan been, if there was any at all? They seemed to have nothing to say, no answer for the question that had been at the back of his mind ever since that first sleepover.

"I'm waiting." Jonathan said, crossing his arms and cocking his head to one side. He was trying to come off as firm, but he was worried that it was a little intense. He relaxed his posture, trying to seem more open to whatever they had to say. Openness was the only thing they needed right now.

"This is..." Nancy began slowly, looking between the two boys. "It's..."

"It's like... that free love new age kinda stuff, right?" Steve asked, looking to Nancy for approval.

"This isn't the 1960's, Steve." She replied, shooting him a condescending look. "Be serious."

"Well, I'm right, aren't I?" Steve snapped back defensively before quickly calming himself down, "How else would you describe it?" He said, a little bit softer this time.

"Guys, look." Jonathan interjected, commanding their attention though his hands were trembling, "I like... Both of you, okay?" It was hard to say that outloud, with no way for his words to become misconstrued. For a long time Jonathan was kind of banking on his actions being misinterpreted as platonic, but now that they were being open about what they wanted, he realized that he wanted exactly the opposite. He *wanted* the romance. He knew exactly what he had to say now.

They both nodded, Nancy opened her mouth to say something before Steve stopped her.

"Just let him talk." He said, nudging her softly. She closed her mouth.

"I don't want to choose between either of you and I think..." He took a deep breath, "You both feel the same?" That statement was a leap of faith, but he had kissed both of them, so how far could that really be from the truth? Jonathan hoped he wasn't wrong about his gut feeling, that they wanted him as well.

"Yeah." Nancy said softly, just above a whisper, "We want that too."

Jonathan nodded, saying nothing. An admission like that really had

no response, all he could do was let the words echo in his mind. They wanted that, they wanted *him*. He was overjoyed, overwhelmed, he couldn't even begin to describe it.

"So does..." Steve sat up a little, breaking the silence, "Does this make us like... swingers?"

"I don't think it has to make us *like* anything." Nancy said studiously, "It's not like we have to tell anyone about this."

"Oh yeah, we're definitely keeping this a secret." Jonathan added quickly, "For all anyone else knows, I'm just the creepy third wheel, okay?"

"You were never the creepy third wheel, Byers." Steve said, giving him a playful punch to the shoulder.

"I don't know about *never* but..." He looked at Nancy, "Is this all okay?"

That seemed to snap her out of some trance, but she smiled at him nonetheless, "Yes, of course this is okay. Why do you ask that?"

"I guess all this time I thought that it was really... *perverted* to have a crush on... Well, both of you." He laughed nervously, trying to ease some of the tension in the room. Steve visibly flinched at the word *perverted*, and it made Jonathan's gut lurch.

"It's not *perverted* if we feel the same way is it?" Steve asked, and his tone seemed worried. He seemed to be asking Jonathan this in all seriousness, as though he himself weren't sure.

"I... I guess not."

"It's not like we're hurting anyone if..." Steve trailed off, leaving the group to fill in the blanks themselves.

"It doesn't matter if anyone else thinks it's *perverted*," Nancy said firmly, "Because we don't, and we're all that matters in this."

"You're right." Jonathan nodded, steepling his hands at his chin and taking a deep breath.

When she put it that way, he felt a lot more relieved about everything. *It was just between them* , he reassured himself, *no one else has to know* .

“You always know just how to word things, Nance.” Steve said reaching over to cup her face and swarm her with quick pecks all across her lips and cheeks.

“Stop!” She giggled, pulling away, “You’re an *idiot* , Steve Harrington.”

“Where have I heard that one before?” He smirked before turning his attention to Jonathan, who had been watching all this with mild awe. “You’re still wearing the jacket.” Steve’s eyes were looking him up and down, and it was making him blush. He felt like he was under a microscope, and for once it felt actually exciting. It was all he could do to simply nod back.

“I just fell asleep as soon as I got home so I...” Jonathan stammered, unsure of how else to explain himself. Secretly, the jacket made him feel closer to Steve, but he wouldn’t be so quick to admit that.

“It looks good, but I think I already told you that.” Steve said, detangling himself from Nancy and crossing over to his side of the bed.

“O-Oh. Yeah...” Jonathan stuttered, his cheeks no doubt tinted an embarrassing shade of pink. They were facing each other now, Jonathan sitting cross legged and Steve propped up on his elbows, feet dangling off the bed. He cocked his head to one side, smiling at him fondly and reaching up to push a stray hair out of Jonathan’s face.

He flinched back out of habit, not used to someone being so gentle with him in such an intimate way. Jonathan had never done anything like this with anyone, let alone Steve of all people. He couldn’t believe this was happening, that they had even kissed last night . It was all surreal.

Steve took one of Jonathan’s hands in his, stroking it carefully.

“Jonathan, you’re shaking.” Steve remarked casually. It only served to deepen his blush, and he looked away to hide his embarrassment.

“I...” He began, unsure of how to explain how he felt. Did he even have to explain it? They were both beautiful, and they were looking at *him* like he’d put the stars in the sky. Of course he was a little nervous!

Steve dropped Jonathan’s hand, and it flopped down limply against his own lap, making a soft slapping sound against his jeans that seemed to echo in the silence of his room.

Nancy was watching them intently, and Jonathan realized that this must be Steve’s weird way of flirting. He wondered if this charm was how he’d managed to sweep Nancy off her feet, and if that were the case then he felt almost *lucky* to be witnessing this curious display now. He’d never been the target of any flirting, let alone *Steve’s*. Now Jonathan could only wonder where this was headed from here, as he wasn’t very adept in actually flirting back. He hoped he would at least be able to convey his interest without sending out the wrong message entirely.

Steve shifted his position on the bed until he was sitting cross legged facing Jonathan.

“Can I kiss you?” He asked, his tone all business. “Like, for real.”

“What was last night then?” Jonathan laughed nervously, “Practice?”

“Yeah, practice.” Steve affirmed with a strange combination of a shrug and a nod.

“Practice.” He repeated, in complete disbelief that this was even happening right now.

“Just do it.” Nancy said, surprising both of them. They had both kind of forgotten she was there, and watching them intently at that. “Just kiss. Don't overthink it.” And *fuck*, she really did have a way of making everything seem so simple.

“So, can I?” Steve reached out his hand slowly, like he was attempting to pet a skittish deer.

“Y-yeah.” Jonathan cleared his throat before saying more confidently, “You can.”

Almost immediately, Steve wrapped his hand around the nape of Jonathan’s neck, pulling him close and slotting their mouths together in a surprisingly gentle kiss. It was definitely softer this time, more curious and exploratory than out of hurried desperation like last night. If last night’s kiss was a goodbye, then this one was definitely a hello.

Despite all this, Jonathan couldn't help but note how *good* Steve seemed to be at driving him crazy. He would pull Jonathan’s bottom lip into his mouth, gently nibbling before releasing him. *Is this what he did with Nancy?* The thought, which probably should've killed the mood, only reminded him of her presence. Oh, Nancy. She was watching this too. What would she be thinking of all this? Jonathan shivered at the thought, letting out a whimper from the back of his throat as Steve parted his lips with his tongue.

He seemed to be drinking in the noises his actions were eliciting, letting out a small chuckle that seemed to vibrate between them. Jonathan pulled back, panting softly as though he'd been running a marathon. His heart was racing, he was pretty noticeably hard, and he also noticed Steve was too.

“Steve, I...” He sighed, wiping his mouth and shaking his head. “What the fuck.” He chuckled nervously, still unsure of what just happened.

“What? Was it bad or something?”

“No, not at all, I just...” *I just want more*, he thought to himself. He wanted to do something about their... current state, but that was another step; one he was too afraid to take at the moment. He turned to Nancy, whose face was slowly growing red.

“A-Are you okay?” He asked sheepishly.

Jonathan still couldn't shake the feeling that what they were doing was wrong, that this was technically cheating and he was ruining their relationship. He kept thinking that Nancy or Steve would just

snap and call him perverted or a home wrecker, as though this had all just been some kind of cruel test.

“*I’m fine, I just really...*” Nancy leaned in closer, biting her lip as she ghosted her hand across Jonathan’s thigh, “I just really want to help you with *that*,” she said as she palmed his groin lightly. His breath hitched, and he let out a soft moan that was just above a breath. He heard Steve make a strangled sound and glanced over at him. He appeared to be just as absorbed as Nancy had been, watching the proceedings with a strange reverent awe.

“N-Nancy I...” But he didn’t know what to say, what he even *could* say, being in the state he was in. It was too much, not enough, he couldn’t decide. She smiled slyly at him, hooking one leg over his as she insinuated herself into his lap. She seemed to fit perfectly, like a puzzle piece, and now they were closer than ever. Their foreheads were almost touching, and all Jonathan could do was stare.

Instead of going in for a kiss, as Jonathan had come to expect by this point, Nancy went for his neck.

“N-Nancy!” He stuttered, taken aback by how good it all felt.

“Do you want me to stop?” She said, her voice a soft whisper against his ear.

“No, no.” He whispered back, almost like a mantra. It all felt too good to stop.

“Good.” She replied, before continuing to kiss and bite at his neck.

Where did she even learn to do this sort of stuff? Was this the teenager experience he had been missing out on for the past couple years? He’d never realized just how sensitive his neck was, but the way she was biting him and the embarrassing little moans that were slipping out of him were definitely telling. Nancy’s presence on his lap was also a new one, and it made him want to squirm. Which, if he had to guess, seemed to be the point to begin with.

Jonathan looked up at Steve, whose eyes were dark, his mouth hanging open just slightly.

“N-Nance, can I?” Steve began, before Nancy pulled off Jonathan’s neck with a soft sucking sound. She turned around to look at him curiously, her lips now almost a bright red.

“Yeah, do whatever.” She replied. Everything that had happened had made her surprisingly loose. That was something Jonathan hadn’t expected; that in their frenzy they had somehow switched roles. Steve was now the cautious one, while Nancy seemed to be running on pure intuition.

“Right?” She said, turning to Jonathan, “Is that okay?”

“Yes, it’s okay.” He replied breathlessly, “It’s all okay.” Nancy had slowly begun grinding against his crotch in earnest, and he felt the air rapidly leave his lungs. He couldn’t think clearly right now, anything Steve did would probably be just as great as everything Nancy was doing.

He supposed he’d gotten a little loose himself, Jonathan thought with a soft chuckle.

Steve briefly glanced between them before leaning forward to kiss Jonathan, his head dangerously close to Nancy’s as she continued marking up his neck and collarbone.

He pulled away from Steve, “Wait, wait, let’s...” He disentangled himself from Steve and Nancy, repositioning so that he was sitting against the headboard. “This... This works better than...” He gestured over to them. That previous arrangement had made him feel as though he were about to fall off the bed.

“You’re always thinking, Byers.” Steve smiled at him, positioning himself at his side. Nancy said nothing, just moved back to Jonathan’s lap, her legs bracketing his thighs.

For a moment, they just sat like that, looking at each other. They were all just taking in their new situation, no words were required. It probably should’ve been awkward, but for some reason it wasn’t. It felt *safe*.

They hit the ground running as Nancy suddenly grabbed for

Jonathan's crotch again. It caught him off guard and he let out a yelp, desperately grinding back into her touch as she picked up speed against his neck again. He opened his mouth to say something when Steve's hand grabbed his chin, turning Jonathan to face him and kissing hungrily. Although he'd been caught off guard, it didn't take long for him to easily fall back into the rhythm of their ministrations. His mind was still in shock, he couldn't believe this was actually happening. All the months spent dreaming about doing this, and it had never occurred to Jonathan that it could *actually* happen.

Steve pulled back, "Hey, Nancy." He looked over at her. She paused, detaching from his neck and looking back at him.

They shared another strange look, and Nancy nodded knowingly, slipping out of Jonathan's lap to sit beside him, quite similar to Steve's current position.

"Do you want us to touch you?" She said, somehow sounding as serious as she did sexy. Jonathan let out a strangled noise, sputtering incredulously. He already knew the answer of course, nodding vigorously at what she was suggesting. Of course he did, of course.

"I've never done this before." Steve laughed nervously.

"Me neither." Jonathan replied, still surprised at how nervous Steve had become in the wake of all this. It was new, to see the previously arrogant Steve Harrington suddenly cautious. It was interesting.

"This is new for all of us." Nancy added, "But just tell us if you want to stop, okay?"

"Okay." Jonathan replied, nodding easily.

They both appeared to study him for a moment before exchanging another silent look. Before he could begin to interpret it they were moving in, their hands working in tandem to unzip his fly.

"Wow," Steve breathed as Jonathan's cock sprung free of his boxers. He didn't have time to feel embarrassed that they were both looking at him so closely, as they both grabbed hold of him at once, fumbling for a steady pace. He clenched his eyes shut, clutching the sheets to

steady himself.

“ *F-fuck* .” Jonathan cursed softly, nervous laughter bubbling up from the back of his throat. He was overwhelmed at all the sensations he was feeling. It was all he could focus on, and his rational brain felt miles away.

“You like that?” Steve muttered, “Does it feel good?”

Jonathan moaned at his words, nodding vigorously. His eyes were still clenched shut as he ducked his head down. He couldn't quite tell whose hands were touching him, only that they seemed to be working together somehow. He'd feel one hand, then two in short, uneven bursts. He tried to discern a pattern, but his mind was too clouded. Jonathan wasn't even sure he wanted to know, as the surprise of it all only heightened his arousal.

“This is all for you, you know that right?” That was Nancy, and her words caused a shiver to run down his spine. “We *love* you.” The ministrations slowed to a stop.

“I love you both too,” He replied without thinking, opening his eyes to look up at them finally.

Steve smiled, “That's good, because I wouldn't do this for just anybody.” Jonathan was about to ask what he meant by that when Steve took hold of him, licking up the length of his cock before taking him fully into his mouth.

“ *S-Steve!* ” Jonathan said in what *definitely* wasn't a whimper. This was the last thing he expected, now all he could focus on was not bucking his hips so Steve could continue what he was doing unabated. Jonathan didn't want to hinder this in *any* way, as Steve's head bobbed up and down he couldn't help but wonder if he'd done this before. His movements were systematically tearing him apart, with every swirl of his tongue across his length Jonathan swore he was losing it more and more, but the last thing he wanted was for him to stop.

Even though Steve had just started, Jonathan was already getting pretty close, his hands were clenching the sheets like a lifeline and

his toes were curling uncontrollably. Nancy seemed to notice this because she took one of his hands, holding it against her cheek.

“Does it feel good?” He simply nodded in response, studying her face. Nancy’s eyes were dark, and her cheeks were an adorable shade of red. She seemed just as caught up in this as him. “Are you gonna cum for us, Jonathan?” And when she said that, all hope was lost.

Jonathan let out a stuttering moan as he came, trying to keep quiet as he remembered his family was still in the other room. Nancy’s eyes grew wide, but she looked excited.

Steve pulled off with an obscene popping sound, swallowing and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking up at him cautiously.

“Was I okay?” He asked, surprisingly meek for the popular Steve Harrington.

“More than okay,” he panted, trying to catch his breath. Jonathan straightened up a bit, quickly straightening himself up and tucking his cock back into his pants.

“I’ve never-”

“Yeah, we know.” Nancy finished, biting her lip and casting him a shy grin.

The reality of what Steve had done just hit him, and he felt a strange mixture of shame and happiness. It swirled in the back of his mind uneasily as he noticed Steve was still hard.

“C-Can I...” Jonathan cleared his throat, “Or, can we uh...”

“Round 2?” Steve suggested, his grin was smug and insufferable. Jonathan loved it.

The boys shared a knowing look before turning their gaze to Nancy, who smiled back at them slyly.

“Yes, definitely round 2,” Jonathan replied, his heart racing as Nancy’s smile grew.

For the first time in awhile, Jonathan knew exactly what was going on, and he didn't want any of it to end.

Notes for the Chapter:

im debating on adding one more chapter like as an epilogue of sorts or what. either way im definitely gonna be writing more stuff for this pairing so follow me if ur interested!

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

This is the last chapter of this work. I might do some more oneshots in this "verse" but those will be in the series thingy. I'm probably going to run through and edit this one more time, but I wanted to post it here for now.

The people of Hawkins loved their fireworks.

The stands popped up every year without fail, from empty fields to the parking lots of gas stations, they were as varied as they were numerous.

Fourth of July was a big holiday for the town, and by far the most profitable holiday for these roadside firework stands. Every year the townsfolk would come together and have a big show of it down at the high school football field. Everyone would bring various snacks and fireworks, adults would socialize politely, and the kids would shoot roman candles off at the trees. At the end of the night there would be a big firework show, which could be seen and heard from miles around. In addition to being a close knit community, the small town of Hawkins was rife with old school displays of traditionalism. (This was what lead to their obsession with fireworks in the first place)

It was as though they were channeling their small town pride through the amount of smoke that stretched across the sky by the end of the night. It had become almost impossible to stop a town like theirs from celebrating dramatically, and the legality of this tradition was one of the few grey areas of the law that most of the cops happened to overlook. After all, no one wanted to be the first one to say anything and risk backlash. The town was nothing if not united by their almost vehement patriotism.

Jonathan couldn't remember the last time he'd been to one of those gatherings. Loud fireworks had scared him as a kid, and he'd always preferred to stay home and light sparklers with his mother. By the

time he was old enough to get over his fear, fraternizing with his peers over hot dogs and fireworks was *not* up his alley.

Will, however, was in love with the whole tradition. As soon as he could talk, he was begging to go every year. At first their mother had hesitated to leave Jonathan by himself, but he eventually assured her it would be fine. It was just Fourth of July, after all; not a sentimental holiday by any means. Besides, at the end of the night Will would burst through the front door, his mouth running a mile a minute to tell Jonathan about all he'd seen. That was celebration enough.

This year, Steve's parents were having a party, though it was probably only a party in the loosest sense of the term. According to Steve, it was mostly his parents' friends, the typical insufferable business types who wore suits to *everything*.

"It's going to be totally boring," He had said, "But I don't have anything else to do, and I suspect you two don't either so..."

So, of course they were going. It was as simple as that.

Jonathan and Nancy pulled up to Steve's house just before sunset, taking in the surprising amount of cars packed into the Harrington's driveway.

"Guess it is a party." Jonathan muttered as he parked in the street.

"A party for old people." Nancy added, shooting him an infectious grin he couldn't help but smile back at. It was a recent phenomena for him to smile this much, but he wasn't exactly jumping to do anything about it.

They got out of the car and headed up to the front door, as they did an older couple that had arrived at the same time fell in step with them. They eyed Jonathan and Nancy suspiciously as they rang the doorbell, and Jonathan couldn't help but fiddle with his clothes to appear more put together somehow. Nancy shared a pointed look with him before biting her lip and casting her gaze towards the ground. *I don't know what their deal is*, he thought to himself as the door swung open, *we both got invited to be here*.

Steve's father was the one who answered the door, taking Jonathan off guard momentarily before he remembered it was technically his party.

"Hey, glad you could make it." He beamed assuredly at the older couple, gaze faltering when he spotted the two teenagers looking quite out of place on his front porch. "Come in. All of you." He said to them, his tone growing much colder.

They all entered the house just as Steve peaked over the banister from the second floor, his eyes lighting up as soon as he spotted Nancy and Jonathan.

"Your friends are here, Steve." His mother said, joining Steve's father in the hallway and nodding in their direction. Steve didn't reply, simply barreling down the stairs to greet them. His excitement was contagious as well as endearing, and Jonathan looked at his feet so no one would see the embarrassing blush creeping across his face.

The adults chatted amicably and were eventually whisked away by Steve's parents to the living room. Nancy watched them leave, and Jonathan looked over at her curiously. He could tell they were thinking the same thing; it was weird to see Steve's parents like this, entertaining guests and having a good time.

It wasn't like they ever fought or yelled at Steve in front of them; it was more like they were all strangers sharing one home.

Usually when Nancy and Jonathan came over they were gone, but when Steve's parents were there his mother was plastered to the couch, watching some soap opera and glaring daggers at them. Steve's father spent most of his time on the phone in his study, his voice muffled but periodically rising enough to be heard through the walls as he negotiated with clients.

Nancy and Jonathan could read between the lines enough to know that the family wasn't a happy one. The distance between the study and the living room, and Steve's bedroom from all of that, was a yawning abyss that no one hoped to cross.

Instead of letting it bother them, they tried to make it up to Steve in

little ways, like making sure they were close to him as much as possible, as if the two of them could draw out his problems with only their touch.

“Hi guys.” Steve said, jamming his hands in his pockets bashfully, “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course, no problem.” Jonathan replied with a small nod, “We don't have anything else to do.”

“And we *like* hanging out with you.” Nancy quipped, elbowing Jonathan playfully.

“I would hope so,” Steve chuckled, “Are you guys hungry?”

Without another word, the two followed him to the impressive spread laid out in the kitchen. They each filled up their plates with various snacks, all except for Steve, who was stealing little bites off their plates when he thought they weren't looking.

“Hey, I saw that!” Nancy exclaimed, her smile wide and eyes bright.

“Saw what?” Steve asked, eyes wide and oblivious despite his obvious mouth full of food. Jonathan gave both of them a bewildered look, drawing his plate of food closer without another word.

They ate side by side in the dining room with a perfect view of the party going on in the living room, the group ate silently and observed. Dinner and a show.

This crowd of people were kind of intimidating, and Jonathan watched them with a vague disgust and even vaguer fascination. They all seemed to be the type of people who never really listened to each other, just waited for their turn to talk. It was perplexing how on edge a room full of supposed friends could be, but he saw it pervade every faction of the party.

There were a couple of women standing by the fireplace, who all seemed to be giving each other subtle looks of disdain, and yet whenever it was their turn to speak they'd become their bright chipper selves again. There were a group of guys, Steve's father being among them, who unapologetically ogled every woman who passed

them. It was definitely gross to watch, but it was also intriguing. It was like observing a complex ecosystem, and Jonathan felt completely alien to an environment such as this. He found he couldn't look away. If this party were an ecosystem, Jonathan was expertly camouflaged, and he got the feeling that he wasn't the only one.

Occasionally one of the adults would engage Steve, having recognized him from these types of parties before. However, other than a quick hello most of them would ignore the teenagers altogether. It was almost like being invisible, a feeling that Jonathan was well versed in.

"Come on," Steve said when they were all finished, "Let's go upstairs."

It was much quieter in his room. With the din of the party muffled behind his door, all they could hear were distant laughter and the occasional pop of a firework outside. The group wordlessly headed for the bed, assuming their usual position for cuddling with Jonathan in the middle and Nancy and Steve on either side. It was almost like spooning, but could he still call it that with three people involved? Steve and Jonathan were technically spooning, with Jonathan facing towards Nancy and Steve curled into his back. However, what he was doing with Nancy wasn't quite spooning. She was resting her head on his chest, curling close and tangling her feet with his and Steve's. Jonathan couldn't remember when this had become their usual position, but it felt right, so he wasn't going to be the one to suggest they change anything. He was just surprised at how fast he'd gotten used to Nancy's head on his chest, with Steve's arms wrapped tightly around him.

Ever since their mutual confession the group had become closer than ever. Their relationship together ended up being quite similar to the friendship they'd already had, and they fell into it with ease and familiarity. Whenever it was possible, they were together. They hung out with Jonathan in the dark room during lunch and before school, they went to Nancy's house almost every afternoon, and they bounced from house to house nearly every weekend at this point. Their excuses for seeing each other had become more and more elaborate each time, and Jonathan hoped that his mother wouldn't compare his subpar grades to how many "study sessions" he'd had

that school year. There was simply no rational explanation he could offer up as to why he *had* to see Nancy and Steve every weekend and almost every day of the week, or why he had to talk to them on the phone when he wasn't around them.

When summer vacation had finally rolled around, it was almost a relief to be done with the constant explanations and little white lies. During this time they were barely seen apart, and all their parents could do was look on with mild bewilderment, not sure whether to be proud of their children for being social, or confused as to where they were going all the time.

Jonathan wasn't sure if he should've been concerned at how close they'd become, he was too busy enjoying himself for once. It couldn't be wrong if they were all happy, right? Besides, the only thing that had really changed about their dynamic was that now they kissed. Oh yeah, and when they kissed, they kissed *a lot*.

It was something they all had to get used to, but Jonathan was especially surprised by how quickly things had developed. He'd never been so close with anyone before, and he'd essentially hit the ground running by dating two people at once. Nancy and Steve had already been intimate before, so Jonathan was the one with the catching up to do.

At first, he'd been too nervous to kiss Steve. For some reason, the two times they'd kissed before hadn't felt real to him, but when it finally hit Jonathan that they were in an actual *relationship*, he panicked. He'd freeze up every time Steve got too close, wrestling with his feelings and his long held notions about what relationships could be. Did kissing Steve make him queer if he still kissed Nancy, or did the two acts cancel each other out somehow? Jonathan had always considered himself to be very average, but this whole experience was turning that idea on its head. Luckily for him, Steve and Nancy were very understanding about everything. They took things slow, allowing him to set the pace, and eventually, Jonathan began gaining the confidence to show off how he truly felt. After that, he didn't want any of it to stop, and they were often the ones telling him to slow down. He supposed it was a two way street when it came to their... relationship. (Or was it technically a three way street?)

They'd skirted around concisely defining things for awhile, and even though it was understood they all loved each other that was about all they knew for sure.

Nancy sighed contentedly, like she was coming home after a long trip, and snuggled closer to him. Jonathan tried not to think too hard about what it all meant, because in the long run he was happier than he'd been for quite awhile. That was all that really mattered. They laid there for a long time with nothing particularly important to say. Steve, with his arms draped over Jonathan as he smiled into the curve of his neck and absentminded toyed with his hair. Jonathan, with his chin resting on Nancy's head with his arms wrapped around her. Everything else felt far away, the fireworks popping in quick succession the only reminder of where they were right now.

Steve slowly stretched his legs, wiggling his toes between the other two's feet, fully aware that they were both extremely ticklish there.

"Stop!" Nancy and Jonathan both cried in unison, yanking their feet away from Steve's before they all burst out into a fit of giggles.

"You do this *every* time." Jonathan laughed, detangling from Nancy to address him face to face.

"Yeah!" Nancy added, peering over Jonathan's shoulder to look at Steve, "And you *know* we can't even tickle you back cause you're not ticklish."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He replied, his fingers going for Jonathan's armpits and wriggling incessantly. Jonathan laughed, jerking away from Steve and giving a playful shove.

"You're an idiot." He said, but the smile on his face wasn't disturbed a bit as he paused to catch his breath. Steve chewed on his thumb and looked back at him thoughtfully, as if considering Jonathan's comment.

"I'm not *completely* un-ticklish." He said after a brief pause, smiling mischievously and looking between the two of them.

"Is that the official term?" Nancy giggled, " *Un-* ticklish."

"Of course it is!" Steve replied defensively, "It's like science or something."

"Or *something* ." Jonathan scoffed, propping himself up on one elbow to look at him more closely. "Well, where are you ticklish then?"

"I'm not giving it up that easily! You have to guess."

"That wouldn't just be a flimsy excuse for us to get on top of you would it?" Nancy punctuated this accusation by rolling her eyes.

"Of course not!" Steve sputtered, feigning surprise, "I'm hurt you'd suggest such a thing."

"Right, my bad." She narrowed her eyes at him before turning her attention to Jonathan by positioning herself closer to him. Jonathan had gotten pretty good at reading Nancy himself, and right now he could tell she had a plan, her eyebrows were knit together, but her eyes were lit up, as though she knew something he didn't. Steve looked on, his confusion growing more and more apparent, but he didn't stop whatever Nancy was doing. They both wanted to see what she had in mind.

"Hey stranger." She said coolly, giving him a slight nudge.

"Hey you." Jonathan replied casually, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" Nancy said, looking up at him with a sly smile.

This was a game they sometimes played when they were close to kissing each other, with Nancy usually being the one pulling the strings, and Steve knew this as well having been the target of these kind of games. He immediately perked up, watching them intently.

"It depends." Jonathan pretended to think, "Have we met before?"

"Maybe." Nancy giggled and buried her head in his chest, the sound was a soft vibration against him. Jonathan glanced over at Steve. His eyes looked hopeful as he bit his lip, just waiting for someone to make a move. *If he wants me to make a move*, Jonathan thought, *then*

why shouldn't I? He looked down at Nancy, who was still hiding her face from him.

Jonathan cupped Nancy's chin, tilting it upwards until they were facing each other. She looked almost relieved that he had *done* something, instead of putting it all on her. Their faces were so close together, lips just barely touching. Jonathan didn't think he heard anyone breath.

They briefly studied each other before he leaned forward, kissing her gently. Nancy deepened the kiss immediately as she parted Jonathan's lips with her tongue. He let out a sound from the back of his throat that was caught somewhere between a moan and sigh, swiping the pad of his thumb across Nancy's cheek. She hummed, somewhat in appreciation, as her tongue persistently explored his mouth.

Even after he'd gotten better at kissing, even after he'd grown accustomed to the techniques and styles that Steve and Nancy liked to employ, it was still a shock to him when they actually *kissed* him. It was like a performance every time it happened, with Jonathan as the helpless spectator. They were always finding new ways to surprise him, and he hoped he could always return the favor. When he kissed Nancy or Steve, the only thoughts in his mind were how he could keep doing this for the rest of his life, if possible.

Jonathan's heart was racing and the sounds of them kissing sounded impossibly loud in the silence of Steve's room. It seemed to drown out everything, even rational thought. Jonathan supposed that was just what the purpose of kissing was.

"H-Hey." Steve said, trying to play it cool despite being quite obviously flustered at what was going on. "That's not..."

Nancy pulled away from the kiss, glancing over at Steve before pushing Jonathan lower onto the bed and clambering over him until she was straddling his waist. It was only once they were in this position that she continued the kiss, this time alternating between kissing Jonathan and shooting Steve a couple of sly looks. Distantly, he could hear a small gasp from Steve, who was still shocked even though they'd done this kind of thing before. Jonathan knew he was

kind of being used as a pawn in this game Nancy was playing, but he was too blissed out to care. She pulled back from the kiss, turning to look at Steve again.

“Feeling left out?” She said. Steve let out an exasperated groan, and for the first time Jonathan actually looked over at him. His eyes were dark, and he was tousling his hair as though he were anxious. However, the blush on his cheeks told another story entirely.

“You can join us.” Jonathan said softly, as though permission hadn’t been granted to all of them for months now. He felt an odd sort of empathy for Steve, as he had been in the same position when they’d first started doing this. It was a brief moment of recognition that skittered over his mind and faded away as Nancy nodded at Steve, who was looking incredibly relieved as he leaned closer to both of them.

“You can always join us.” Nancy added, taking Steve’s shaking hands in hers. Steve nodded dumbly before smiling brightly.

“Of course,” He nodded, “Always.”

Much later, after all their clothes had been lost and then found again, the group laid haphazardly sprawled across one another, bathing in the afterglow of their earlier activities. At some point, someone had turned off the lights and turned on the lamp at Steve’s desk, casting a soft orange haze over the entire room. Jonathan laid awake, his body feeling weightless as he felt both Steve and Nancy’s bodies close to him. He wasn’t sure if anyone else was awake, as they had all been falling in and out of sleep for awhile, but he quickly got his answer from Nancy, as she stirred and shifted her position against Jonathan.

“Can you believe we’re gonna be seniors?” Nancy spoke softly into the crook of his shoulder, but the question was meant for everyone present. She squeezed his hand, trying to rouse a response from him.

“No.” Steve replied quickly from where he was lying, “Don’t say that.” He said it as though he were trying to forget, burying his head in Jonathan’s chest.

“Well we *are* .” Nancy sat up, flashing him a lopsided grin, “No use

avoiding it.”

“Leave it to Nancy Wheeler to think of school on the Fourth of July.” Jonathan quipped as he ruffled Steve’s hair affectionately.

“In a year we’ll be high school graduates of Hawkins High.” She continued, her voice sounding far away.

“How prestigious.” Steve replied sarcastically, his voice vibrating against Jonathan’s chest where his head was still buried.

“No, I’m serious.” Nancy said, leaning against Steve’s headboard, “What’s going to happen to us when we graduate?”

She didn’t look at them, only staring at the window, with the blinds drawn tight against the rest of the world. The room was silent. Steve didn’t have a snappy comeback, and Jonathan didn’t have a realistic answer for her.

“Well?” She finally said, turning to look at them.

“I don’t know.” Jonathan said dumbly, “I never thought about it, really.”

“You’re going to Caltech, right Nancy?” Steve asked, turning his head up to look at her.

“I’m applying everywhere.” She replied quickly. “Notre Dame, Purdue, Stanford.” It was the canned response she gave everyone when they asked, but they all knew Caltech was her dream school.

“I know that, but where are you *going*?” The question seemed to throw her off momentarily. It was rare for anyone in Hawkins to go to college, let alone a big name university. Many people had tried to discourage her, and Jonathan knew that Nancy’s mother was holding out for her to go somewhere in state, so they could be closer.

“If I get accepted into Caltech, I’m going.”

“Okay so, California, right?” Steve looked up at Jonathan, “Jonathan you’re going to NYU right?”

"I... I hope so." Jonathan said, his hands shaking at the prospect of applying for schools.

Truthfully, this was probably the last summer he would spend doing absolutely nothing. Applications opened August 1st, and he would be hustling from there to get accepted, register, and find somewhere to live up there. Of course, that was only if he got accepted to NYU. He wasn't really thinking about what would happen if he didn't, but the thought made his shiver.

"So that's New York."

"Right, and you are..." Nancy asked, inviting Steve to chime in.

"Don't worry about that," He replied quickly, waving away the suggestion with the flap of a wrist, "I'll always be here, that's not the point."

"So what is the point?" Nancy bit her lip, clearly holding back from everything she wanted to say.

"We'll just have to enjoy senior year, and then when we graduate and you guys move we'll just..." Steve took both of their hands and squeeze encouragingly, "We'll just keep in touch."

"Yeah, we'll always have the breaks too." Jonathan added helpfully. Nancy looked down at their joined hands, her eyebrows knit together uncertainly.

"Don't worry about it, Nance." Steve said, looking directly at her, "We'll figure it out. We have the summer."

"Right. We will." Nancy nodded, as though she'd finally understood. She let out a big sigh before rejoining the two boys, as they welcomed her with open arms. Both boys were especially gentle with Nancy, stroking her hair and squeezing her hand until her contagious smile returned, and order had been restored.

As they faded in and out of sleep, Jonathan couldn't help but resonate with Steve's words. The road ahead of them was a mystery, but they had their senior year together, and they had the summer now. That was plenty of time to make some memories. In fact, if

what Steve said was true, they would have the summer for years to come.

Jonathan supposed that the present was all that really mattered, and he finally understood that as he closed his eyes and allowed himself to be lulled by all the possibilities that were laid out before him.

Notes for the Chapter:

I actually have another chapter fic planned that takes place after the trio has graduated from high school. It's going to be from Steve's perspective, and they get together in an entirely different way, so stay tuned for that!

Author's Note:

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